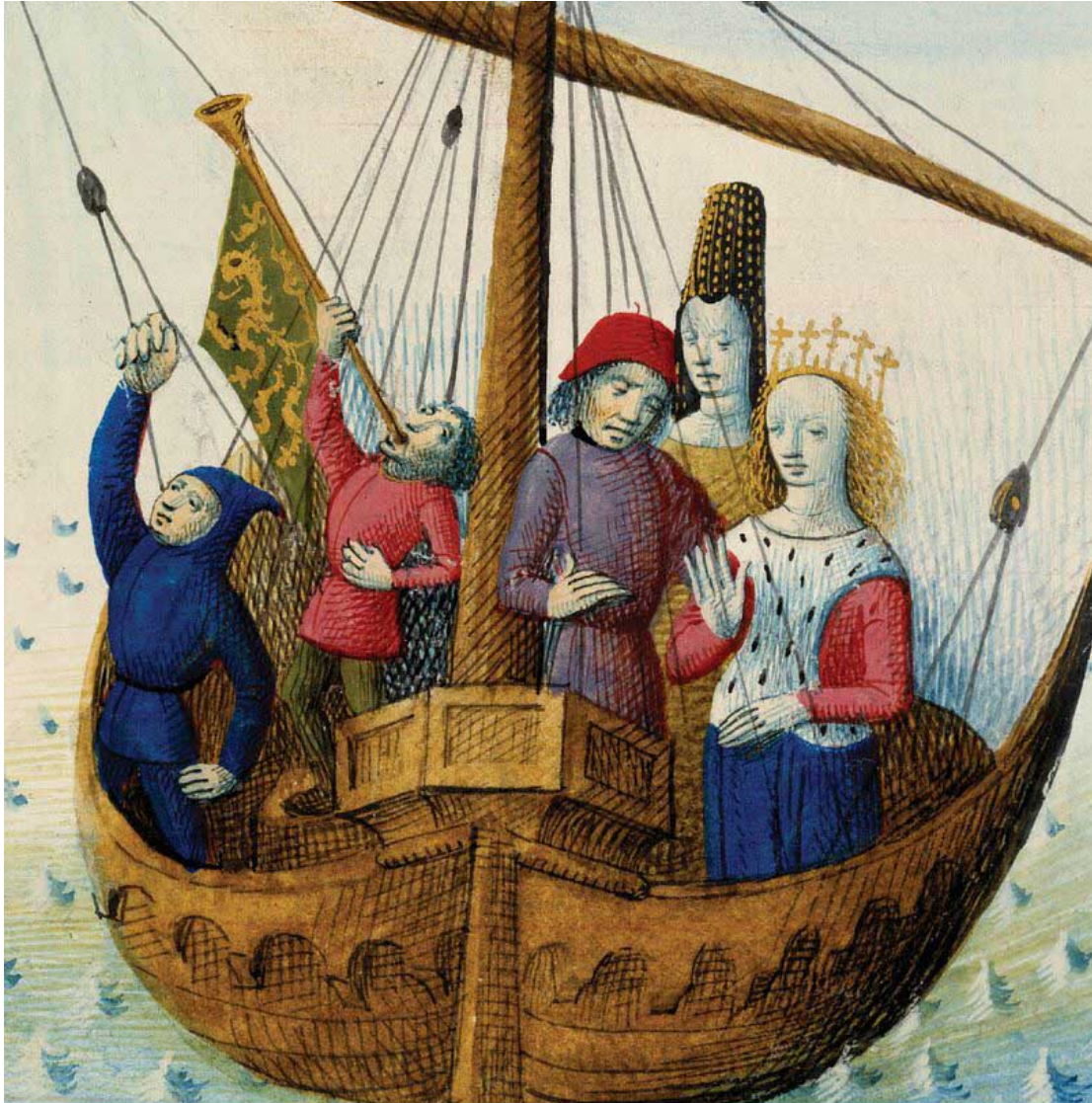


VOLUME A: The Middle Ages



THE NORTON
ANTHOLOGY
ENGLISH
LITERATURE

THE
MIDDLE AGES

VOLUME A
ELEVENTH EDITION

The Middle Ages to ca. 1485



Pilgrims leaving Canterbury, ca. 1420. For more information about this image, see the [Image Gallery](#) for this volume.

43–ca. 410: Roman invasion and occupation of Celtic Britain

ca. 450: Occupation of Britannia by Angles and Saxons begins

597: St. Augustine arrives in Kent; beginning of Angles' and Saxons' conversion to Christianity

790s: first Viking raids in England

871–99: Reign of King Alfred

1066: Norman Conquest

1154–89: Reign of Henry II

ca. 1200: Beginnings of Middle English literature

1360–1400: Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower writing; *Piers Plowman*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

1485: William Caxton's printing of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, one of the first books printed in England

"The Middle Ages" designates the time span roughly from the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the early fifth century C.E. to the European Renaissance and Reformation of the sixteenth century. The adjective "medieval," coined from Latin *medium* (middle) and *aevum* (age), refers to whatever was made, written, or thought during this 1100-year period (itself, of course, containing many subperiods, each with very distinct cultural formations).

"The Renaissance" was so named by nineteenth-century historians and critics who wished to focus on an outburst of creativity attributed to a "rebirth" or revival of Latin and, especially, of Greek learning and literature, which inflected all the arts. The word "Reformation" designates the powerful religious movement that, from the early sixteenth century, repudiated the supreme authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Renaissance spread from Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the rest of Europe, whereas the Reformation began in Germany and quickly affected all of Europe to a greater or lesser degree. The very ideas of renaissance or reformation imply something dormant or lacking in the preceding era. More recently, scholars have emphasized the ways in which sixteenth-century writers, in order to highlight what they saw as the brilliance of their own time, in some sense "created" (often with the intention of demonizing) the Middle Ages.

Medieval authors, of course, did not think of themselves as living in the "middle"; indeed, they sometimes expressed the idea that the world was growing old and that theirs was a declining age, close to the end of time. Yet art, literature, and science flourished during the Middle Ages, in both Christian and secular cultures that preserved, transmitted, and transformed pre- and para-Christian traditions. Later medieval Europe also invented two enduring institutions of the highest significance: parliament and the university.

The works covered in this section of the anthology encompass more than eight centuries, from Caedmon's *Hymn* at the end of the seventh century to *Everyman* at the beginning of the sixteenth. The date 1485, the year of the accession of Henry VII and the beginning

of the Tudor dynasty, is an arbitrary but convenient one to mark the “end” of the Middle Ages in England.

Although different institutions within the Roman Catholic Church provided continuity from the seventh century on, the period experienced enormous historical, social, and linguistic changes. To emphasize these distinct cultural formations and the events underlying them, we have divided the period into three primary sections: Literature of the Early Middle Ages (eighth to eleventh centuries), Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, and Literature of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.

The first two of these periods are brought into being by military occupations: the Old English literature of the early Middle Ages is the product of the displacement, for the most part, of Celtic peoples from the area we know as England, by Saxons, Angles, and Jutes beginning in the fifth century. The second period (Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, the period of Anglo-Norman literature) is the product of the Norman Conquest of 1066. The third period (Literature of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries) is not the product of a specific military occupation, but a long period of warfare (1336–1453) known as the Hundred Years’ War, waged between France and England, which may have inflected the increasing use of English for all discursive purposes.

In the first of these periods (Literature of the Early Middle Ages), the main institutions of literary production are royal courts and monasteries. In the second (Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, in Anglo-Norman England), royal courts, feudal castles, and a range of houses of regular religious (that is, ecclesiastics living communally under a rule), including houses of nuns, patronize and produce literature. In the third period (Literature of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries), we see a devolution of institutional patronage: to be sure, royal courts and bureaucracies, as well as the higher nobility, continue to patronize literary production; but a wide range of religious houses (both male and female), gentry families, and urban organizations (including trade unions, or guilds) also initiate and produce literary works.

Each of these three subperiods has a distinctive linguistic practice. The Saxons and Angles, who began their conquest of the southeastern part of Britain around 450, spoke a Germanic language, which we now call Old English. This language, a recognizable ancestor of Modern English, displays features cognate with other Germanic languages of the period (the ancestors of modern Dutch, German, and Norwegian, for example). As late as the tenth century, part of an Old Saxon poem written on the Continent was transcribed and transliterated into the West Saxon dialect of Old English without presenting problems to its English readers. Between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, this is the language of law, spiritual instruction, philosophy, and literature, a literature unique in breadth and depth in the Europe of its time.

All medieval periods in Britain are multilingual, depending on geography and on institutions. Thus before the Roman occupation Celtic languages were spoken throughout Britain. After the occupation of Saxons and Angles from the mid-fifth century, Celtic languages were spoken and written, in two broad groups, in the geographic areas inhabited by Celtic peoples: in Cornwall and Wales, for example (the so-called Brittonic languages), and in Ireland and Scotland (the so-called Gaelic languages). The written language was used for law, religious instruction, and literature. Latin, the *lingua franca* of the learned, was written throughout Britain in centers of learning—at first monasteries throughout the early medieval period, and then, from the twelfth century forward, in universities and also in all centers of religious learning.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 brought a new language of power and administration, the dialect of French that is now called Anglo-Norman. This language was spoken by the upper classes and was used in legal and administrative environments, as well as for purposes of spiritual instruction, up at least to the end of the fourteenth century. It was also used for historiography and for literary writing, both lyric and narrative romance. Despite significant syntactic change in English after the Norman Conquest, the syntactic influence of Anglo-Norman is uncertain. The syntax of English

remained fundamentally Germanic. By contrast, the influence of Anglo-Norman on the vocabulary of English was enormous, with more than half of later Middle English vocabulary derived from Anglo-Norman or, often via Anglo-Norman, from Latin.

The language we call Middle English was a mixture principally of Old English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin, plus, to a lesser extent, Norwegian and Celtic languages. After the Norman Conquest, English was suppressed socially from elite society, and institutionally from Parliament and law courts. It remained permanently in use as a language of the people. From the mid-twelfth century it was deployed occasionally as the language of spiritual instruction and literature. Across the fourteenth century, however, Middle English (which itself has at least five major literary dialectal groupings) effected its ascent in various linguistic spheres. The upper nobility continued to be bilingual in French and English; literary authors certainly read, and sometimes wrote, in three languages (Latin, French, and English). But by 1400 Middle English was a significant if not the main language of literature, Parliament, historiography, encyclopedism, and spiritual instruction.

The doctrines of Christianity, and the Roman Church specifically, were important throughout the English Middle Ages. This form of Christianity is called “Roman” because the pope, the bishop of Rome, is its central governing authority. Like the other Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Islam—Christianity is monotheistic. Yet Christians hold that there are three “persons” in one God, a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The “Son” is especially important to Christian theology, which maintains that God was incarnated as a man who was crucified and rose from the dead (see “God’s Body,” [pp. 215–84](#)). Christianity incorporated Jewish sacred writings into the Bible. But medieval Christians also maintained that Judaism had been superseded and that Jews’ ongoing religious practice was illegitimate (see “Religious Exclusions and Identities,” [pp. 285–362](#)). The language of the Bible in medieval western Europe was Latin, although parts of it were sometimes translated into the vernacular—

that is, the regional language of spoken discourse, including Old and Middle English.

Book production throughout the medieval period was an expensive process. Until the European development of movable type in the mid-fifteenth century (introduced into England by the entrepreneur William Caxton in 1476), medieval books were reproduced by hand in manuscript (literally “written by hand”). While paper became increasingly common for less expensive manuscripts in the fifteenth century, manuscripts were until then written on carefully prepared animal skin (usually that of calves or sheep), known as parchment or vellum. More expensive books could be illuminated both by colored and calligraphic lettering and by visual images.

The institutions of book production developed across the period. In the earlier medieval period (seventh to eleventh centuries), monasteries were the main centers of book production and storage. Until their dissolution by the government in the 1530s, monastic and other religious houses continued to produce books, but in the early fourteenth century, particularly in London, commercial book-making enterprises emerged. These were loose organizations of various artisans such as parchment makers, scribes, flourishers, illuminators, and binders, who usually lived in the same neighborhoods in towns. A bookseller or dealer (usually a member of one of these trades) would coordinate the production of books to order for wealthy patrons, sometimes distributing the work of copying to different scribes, who would be responsible for different gatherings, or quires, of the same book. Such shops could call upon the services of professional scribes working in the bureaucracies of the royal court.

The market for books also changed across the period: while monasteries, other religious houses, and royal courts continued to fund the production of books, beginning in the Anglo-Norman period (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) books were also produced for (and sometimes by) noble and gentry households. From the fourteenth century on the market was widened yet further, with wealthy urban patrons also ordering books. Some of these books were dedicated to

single works, some largely to single genres; most were much more miscellaneous, containing texts of many kinds and (particularly in the Anglo-Norman period) written in different languages, especially Latin, French, and English. Only a small proportion of medieval English books survive; large numbers were destroyed at the time of the destruction of the monasteries and their libraries in the 1530s.

Texts in Old English, Anglo-Norman, Middle Welsh and Irish, Early Middle English, and the more difficult texts in later Middle English (for example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Piers Plowman*) are here translated. Chaucer and other Middle English works may be read in the original, or lightly modernized versions of the original, even by the beginner, with the help of marginal glosses and notes. These texts have been spelled and generally presented in ways intended to aid the reader in every possible way.

Analyses of the sounds and grammar of Middle English and of Old and Middle English prosody are presented on [pp. 21–24](#).

LITERATURE OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

From the first to the fifth century, England was a province of the Roman Empire and was named "Britannia" after its Celtic-speaking inhabitants, the Britons, who adapted themselves to Roman occupation. The withdrawal of the Roman legions in 410, in a vain attempt to protect Rome itself from the threat of Germanic conquest, left Britain and Britons vulnerable to Germanic occupiers. These belonged primarily to three related ethnic groups: the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes. The name "England" derives from the word "Englaland," the land of the Angles; the names of the counties Essex, Sussex, and Wessex refer to the territories occupied by the East, South, and West Saxons.

The occupation of Angles and Saxons was no sudden conquest, but extended over decades of engagement with the native Britons. The latter were, finally, largely confined to the extremities of Britain, such as the mountainous region of Wales, where the modern form of a Celtic language is spoken alongside English to this day.

The Britons had become Christians by the late fourth century, after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 380. For about 150 years after the beginning of the Germanic occupation, Christianity was maintained only in the remoter regions, where the polytheistic Saxons and Angles had failed to penetrate. In the year 597, however, a Benedictine monk (afterward St. Augustine of Canterbury) arrived, sent from Rome by Pope Gregory as a missionary to King Ethelbert of Kent, the most southerly of the kingdoms into which England was then divided. At about the same time missionaries from Ireland began to preach Christianity in the north. Within seventy-five years the island was once more predominantly Christian. By the time of the Synod of Whitby (664), the English Church adopted the rites of the Roman Church, over Celtic Christianity. That allegiance to Rome would survive until 1534, when Henry VIII rejected papal authority and declared himself, as king, head of the English Church.

Christianity is a religion of the book. The impact of Christianity on literacy is evident from the fact that the first extended written specimen of the Old English language is a code of laws promulgated by Ethelbert (ca. 560–616), the first English Christian king. Indeed, Christianity brought an institutionalized commitment to book production and preservation, in the form of monasteries, founded and renewed with royal support. Here we briefly define three major periods in which the promotion of learning was monastic, royal, or both.

The first great period of monastic learning occurred in northern England (Northumbria) in a period of great instability in the Mediterranean basin—the time of the Islamic occupation of the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula—and in Europe generally. On the northeastern coast of England, however, scholarship flourished. Beginning in the mid-seventh century, Benedictine monasteries, some for women, were founded, including Whitby and Wearmouth-Jarrow. The greatest scholar of this period and place is Bede, whose Latin *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731) tells the story of the conversion of England to Roman Christianity. This great book remains one of our most important sources of knowledge about the period.

From 797, the now Christian Saxons and Angles of England were themselves subjected to new Germanic invasions by polytheistic Scandinavians we know as Vikings—called variously Vikings, Danes, and Northmen in early medieval England—who in their longboats repeatedly ravaged the coast, sacking Bede's monastery among others. (Such a raid late in the late tenth century inspired *The Battle of Maldon*, the last of the Old English heroic poems.) The Danes also occupied the northern part of the island, threatening to overrun the rest. They were contained by Alfred, king of the West Saxons from 871 to 899, who for a time united all the kingdoms of southern England.

This most active king was also responsible for a second great period of textual production in early medieval England. Alfred was an enthusiastic patron of translating sophisticated philosophical,

historical, and pastoral works into the vernacular. He himself translated, or had translated, various key works, mostly written originally between the fourth and sixth centuries in the period of Roman conversion to Christianity, which he considered necessary to know in the period of English conversion and consolidation (for the motivating ideas of his textual program, see his Preface to the *Pastoral Care* in this anthology, [p. 119](#)). The most important of these works was Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (523). Alfred probably also instigated a translation of Bede's *History* and the beginning of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: this year-by-year record in Old English of important events in England was maintained at one monastery until the middle of the twelfth century. Practically all Old English poetry is preserved in copies made in the West Saxon dialect after the reign of Alfred.

The third great period for institutions of learning in pre-Conquest England is known as the Benedictine Reform, a tenth-century movement designed to reaffirm in English monasticism the Benedictine practice (the monastic rule introduced into Europe by St. Benedict in 516). The movement had royal support from King Edgar (r. 959–975) and was strong in the south of England. The greatest scholars to emerge from this movement, a generation later than the original reformers, were as follows: Aelfric of Eynsham (ca. 955–ca. 1010), who produced vernacular hagiography (that is, lives of saints), doctrinal homilies, and biblical translation; and Wulfstan, archbishop of York (d. 1023), one of whose vigorous sermons, written in the face of Viking invasion, is reproduced in this anthology ([p. 132](#)).

EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND



Old English Poetry

The invading Angles and Saxons brought with them a tradition of oral poetry (see "Bede and Cædmon's *Hymn*," [p. 30](#)). Because nothing was written down before the conversion to Christianity, we have only circumstantial evidence of what that poetry must have been like. Aside from a few short inscriptions on small artifacts, the earliest records in the English language are in manuscripts produced at monasteries and other religious establishments, beginning in the seventh century. Literacy was mainly restricted to servants of the church, and so it is natural that the bulk of Old English literature deals with religious subjects and is mostly drawn from Latin sources. Under the expensive conditions of manuscript production, few texts were written down that did not pertain directly to the work of the church. Most of Old English poetry is contained in just four manuscripts.

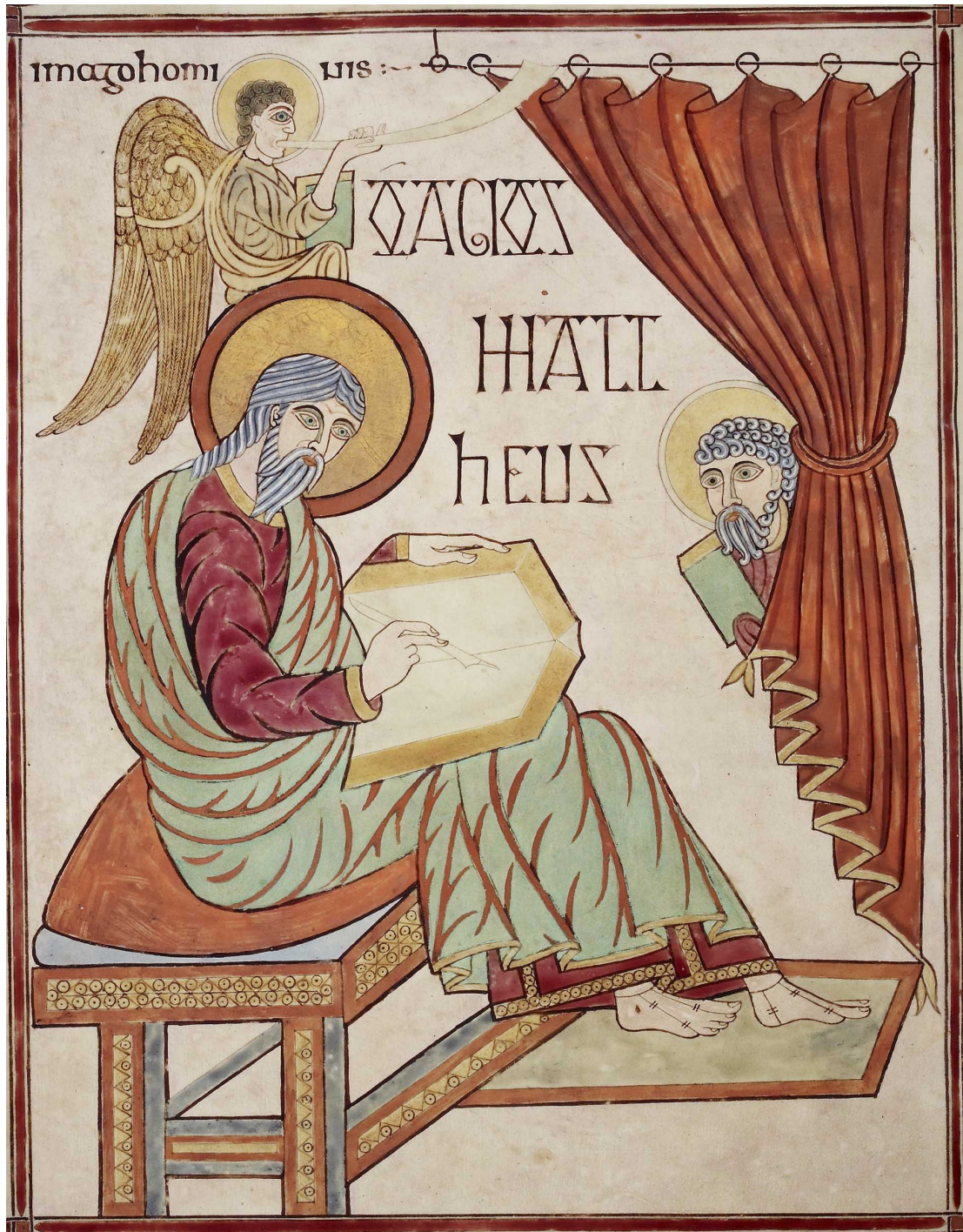
Germanic heroic poetry continued to be performed orally in alliterative verse and was at times used to describe current events. *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which celebrates an English victory over the Danes in traditional alliterative verse, is preserved in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. *The Battle of Maldon* commemorates a Viking victory in which the Christian English invoke the ancient code of honor that obliges a warrior to avenge his slain lord or to die beside him.

These poems show that the aristocratic, heroic, and kinship values of Germanic society continued to inspire both clergy and laity in the Christian era. As represented in the relatively small body of Old English heroic poetry that survives, this world shares many characteristics with the heroic world described by Homer. Nations are reckoned as groups of people related by kinship rather than by geographical areas, and kinship is the basis of the heroic code. The tribe is ruled by a chieftain who is called *king*, a word that has "kin" for its root. The *lord* (a word derived from Old English *hlaf*, "loaf," plus *weard*, "protector") surrounds himself with a band of retainers (many of them his blood kindred) who are members of his

household. He leads his men in battle and rewards them with the spoils; royal generosity was one of the most important aspects of heroic behavior. In return, the retainers are obligated to fight to the death for their lord, and if he is slain, to avenge him or die in the attempt. Blood vengeance is regarded as a sacred duty, and in poetry, everlasting shame awaits those who fail to observe it.

Even though the heroic world of poetry could be invoked to rally resistance to the Viking invasions, it was already remote from the Christian world of early medieval England. Nevertheless, Christian writers like the *Beowulf* poet were fascinated by the distant culture of their pagan ancestors and by the inherent conflict between the heroic code and a religion that teaches that we should “forgive those who trespass against us” and that “all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” The *Beowulf* poet looks back on that ancient world with admiration for the courage of which it was capable and at the same time with elegiac sympathy for its inevitable doom.

For Old English poetry, it is difficult and probably futile to draw a line between “heroic” and “Christian,” for the best poetry crosses that boundary. Much of the Christian poetry is also cast in the heroic mode: although the Saxons and Angles adapted themselves readily to the ideals of Christianity, they did not do so without adapting Christianity to their own heroic ideal. Thus Moses and St. Andrew, Christ and God the Father are represented in the style of heroic verse. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the Cross speaks of Christ as “this young man, . . . strong and courageous.” In Cædmon’s *Hymn* the creation of heaven and earth is seen as a mighty deed, an “establishment of wonders.” Early medieval heroines, too, are portrayed in the heroic manner. St. Helena, who leads an expedition to the Holy Land to discover the true Cross, is described as a “battle-queen.” The biblical narrative related in the Old English poem *Judith* is recast in the terms of Germanic heroic poetry. Christian and heroic ideals are poignantly blended in *The Wanderer*, which laments the separation from one’s lord and kinsmen and the transience of all earthly treasures. Love between man and woman, as described by the female speaker of *The Wife’s Lament*, is disrupted by separation, exile, and the malice of kinfolk.



Lindisfarne Gospels. Opening of the Gospel of St. Matthew, ca. 698. The veil of mysteries is drawn aside, and the author of the gospel text copies his book as if by divine dictation.

The world of Old English poetry is often elegiac. Men are said to be cheerful in the mead hall, but even there they think of war, of

possible triumph but probable failure. Romantic love—one of the principal topics of later literature—appears hardly at all. Even so, at some of the bleakest moments, the poets powerfully recall the return of spring. The blade of the magic sword with which Beowulf has killed Grendel's mother in her sinister underwater lair begins to melt, "as ice melts / when the Father eases the fetters off the frost / and unravels the water-ropes, He who wields power."

The poetic diction, formulaic phrases, and repetitions of parallel syntactic structures, which are determined by the versification, are difficult to reproduce in modern translation. A few features may be anticipated here and studied in the text of Cædmon's *Hymn*, printed below ([pp. 31–33](#)) with interlinear translation.

Poetic language is created out of a special vocabulary that contains a multiplicity of terms for *lord*, *warrior*, *spear*, *shield*, and so on. Synecdoche and metonymy are common figures of speech, as when "keel" is used for *ship* or "iron" for *sword*. A particularly striking effect is achieved by the kenning, a compound of two words in place of another as when *sea* becomes "whale-road" or *body* is called "life-house." The figurative use of language finds playful expression in poetic riddles, of which about one hundred survive. Common (and sometimes uncommon) creatures, objects, or phenomena are described in an enigmatic passage of alliterative verse, and the reader must guess their identity. Sometimes they are personified and ask, "What is my name?"

Because special vocabulary and compounds are among the chief poetic effects, the verse is constructed in such a way as to show off such terms by creating a series of them in apposition. In the second sentence of Cædmon's *Hymn*, for example, God is referred to five times appositively as "he," "holy Creator," "mankind's Guardian," "eternal Lord," and "Master almighty." This use of parallel and appositive expressions, known as *variation*, gives the verse a highly structured and musical quality.

The overall effect of the language is to formalize and elevate speech. Instead of being straightforward, it moves at a slow and stately pace with steady indirection. A favorite mode of this

indirection is irony. A grim irony pervades heroic poetry even at the level of diction, where *fighting* is called “battle-play.” A favorite device, known by the rhetorical term *litotes*, is ironic understatement. After the monster Grendel has slaughtered the Danes in the great hall Heorot, it stands deserted. The poet observes, “It was easy then to meet with a man / shifting himself to a safer distance.”

More than a figure of thought, irony is also a mode of perception in Old English poetry. In a famous passage, the Wanderer articulates the theme of *Ubi sunt?* (where are they now?): “Where did the steed go? Where the young warrior? Where the treasure-giver? . . .” *Beowulf* is full of ironic balances and contrasts—between the aged Danish king and the youthful Beowulf, and between Beowulf, the high-spirited young warrior at the beginning, and Beowulf, the gray-haired king at the end, facing the dragon and death.

The formal and dignified speech of Old English poetry was always distant from the everyday language of the people, and this poetic idiom remained remarkably uniform throughout the roughly three hundred years that separate Cædmon’s *Hymn* from *The Battle of Maldon*. This clinging to old forms—grammatical and orthographic as well as literary—by the early medieval church and aristocracy conceals from us the enormous changes that were taking place in the English language and the diversity of its dialects. The dramatic changes between Old and Middle English did not happen overnight or over the course of a single century. The Normans displaced the English ruling class with their own barons and clerics, whose native language was a dialect of Old French that we call Anglo-Norman. Without a ruling literate class to preserve English traditions, the custom of transcribing vernacular texts in an earlier form of the West-Saxon dialect was abandoned, and both language and literature were allowed to develop unchecked in new directions.

LITERATURE OF THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

The Normans, who took possession of England after the decisive Battle of Hastings (1066), were, like the Saxons and Angles, descendants of Germanic adventurers, who at the beginning of the tenth century had seized a wide part of northern France. Their name is actually a contraction of "Norsemen." A highly adaptable people, they had adopted the French language of the land they had settled in and its Christian religion. Both in Normandy and in Britain they were great builders of castles, with which they enforced their political dominance, and magnificent churches. Norman bishops, who held land and castles like the barons, wielded both political and spiritual authority. The earlier Norman kings of England, however, were often absentee rulers, as much concerned with defending their Continental possessions as with ruling over their English holdings. The English Crown's French territories were enormously increased in 1154 when Henry II, the first of England's Plantagenet kings, ascended the throne. Through his marriage with Eleanor of Aquitaine, the divorced wife of Louis VII of France, Henry had acquired vast provinces in the southwest of France. (See map, The Angevin Empire, [p. 138](#).) Norman rule also saw English involvement in the Crusades and the development of substantial Jewish communities in England. Though encouraged by the Crown to immigrate, Jews faced violence and, in 1290, expulsion.



King Harold Fatally Struck in the Eye. Bayeux Tapestry, textile, ca. 1070–80. The decisive historical moment is captured as Harold falls victim to horizontal attack. Note the dead being stripped of their armor, at the bottom.

Inevitably, there was also literary intercourse among the different languages. The Latin Bible and Latin saints' lives provided subjects for a great deal of Old English as well as Old French poetry and prose. The first medieval drama in the vernacular, *The Play of Adam*, with elaborate stage directions in Latin and realistic dialogue in the Anglo-Norman dialect of French, was probably produced in England during the twelfth century.

The Anglo-Norman aristocracy was especially attracted to Celtic legends and tales that had been circulating orally for centuries. The twelfth-century poets Thomas of England, Marie de France, and Chrétien de Troyes each claims to have obtained their narratives from Breton storytellers, who were probably bilingual performers of native tales for French audiences. *Sir Orfeo* may represent the kind

of lay that served as a model for Marie. "Breton" may indicate that they came from Brittany, or it may have been a generic term for a Celtic bard. Marie speaks respectfully of the storytellers, while Thomas expresses caution about their tendency to vary narratives; Chrétien accuses them of marring their material, which, he boasts, he has retold with an elegant fusion of form and meaning. Marie wrote a series of short romances, which she refers to as "lays" originally told by Bretons. Her versions are the most original and sophisticated examples of the genre that came to be known as the Breton lay, represented here by Marie's *Milun*, *Lanval*, *Laüstic*, *Chevrefoil*, and *Bisclavret*. It is very likely that Henry II is the "noble king" to whom she dedicated her lays and that they were written for his court. Thomas composed a moving, almost operatic version of the adulterous passion of Tristan and Ysolt, very different from the powerful version of the same story by Beroul, also composed in the last half of the twelfth century. Chrétien is the principal creator of the romance of chivalry in which knightly adventures are a means of exploring psychological and ethical dilemmas that the knights must solve, in addition to displaying martial prowess in saving ladies from monsters, giants, and wicked knights. Chrétien, like Marie, is thought to have spent time in England at the court of Henry II.

Thomas, Marie, and Chrétien de Troyes were innovators of the genre that has become known as "romance." The word *roman* was initially applied in French to a work written in the French vernacular. Thus the twelfth-century *Roman de Troie* is a long poem in French about the Trojan War. While this work deals mainly with the siege of Troy, it also includes stories about the love of Troilus for Cressida and of Achilles for the Trojan princess Polyxena. Eventually, "romance" acquired the generic associations it has for us as a story about love and adventure.

Romance was the principal narrative genre for late medieval readers. Insofar as it was centrally concerned with love, it developed ways of representing psychological interiority with great subtlety. That subtlety itself provoked a subgenre of questions about love. Thus in the late twelfth century, Andreas Capellanus (Andrew the Chaplain) wrote a Latin treatise, the title of which may be translated

The Art of Loving Correctly [*Honeste*]. In one part, Eleanor of Aquitaine, her daughter, the countess Marie de Champagne, and other noble women are cited as a supreme court rendering decisions on difficult questions of love—for example, whether there is greater passion between lovers or between married couples. Whether such “courts of love” were purely imaginary or whether they represent some actual court entertainment, they imply that the literary taste and judgment of women had a significant role in fostering the rise of romance in France and Anglo-Norman England.

In Marie’s *Lanval* and in Chrétien’s romances, the court of King Arthur had already acquired for French audiences a reputation as the most famous center of chivalry. That eminence is owing in large measure to a remarkable book in Latin, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, completed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, ca. 1136–38. Geoffrey claimed to have based his “history” on a book in the British tongue (Welsh), but no one has ever found such a book. He drew on a few earlier Latin chronicles, but the bulk of his history was probably fabricated from Celtic oral tradition, his familiarity with Roman history and literature, and his own fertile imagination. The climax of the book is the reign of King Arthur, who defeats the Roman armies but is forced to turn back to Britain to counter the treachery of his nephew Mordred. In 1155 Geoffrey’s Latin was rendered into French rhyme by an Anglo-Norman poet called Wace, and fifty or so years later Wace’s poem was turned by Layamon, an English priest, into a much longer poem that combines English alliterative verse with sporadic rhyme.

Layamon’s work is one of many instances where English receives new material directly through French sources, which may in turn have been drawn from Celtic or Latin sources. There are two Middle English versions of Marie’s *Lanval*; the English romance *Yvain and Gawain* and the Welsh romance *The Lady of the Fountain* (in this anthology) are both slightly simplified versions of Chrétien’s *Le Chevalier au Lion* (The Knight of the Lion). A marvelous English lay, *Sir Orfeo*, is a version of the Orpheus story in which Orpheus succeeds in rescuing his wife from the other world, for which a French original, if there was one, has never been found. Romance,

stripped of its courtly, psychological, and ethical subtleties, had an immense popular appeal for English readers and listeners. Many of these romances are simplified adaptations of more aristocratic French poems and recount in a rollicking and rambling style the adventures of heroes like Guy of Warwick, a poor steward who must prove his knightly worth to win the love of Fair Phyllis. The ethos of many romances, aristocratic and popular alike, involves a knight proving his worthiness through nobility of character and brave deeds rather than through high birth. In this respect romances reflect the aspirations of a lower order of the nobility to rise in the world, as historically some of these nobles indeed did. William the Marshall, for example, the fourth son of a baron of middle rank, used his talents in war and in tournaments to become tutor to the oldest son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He married a great heiress and became one of the most powerful nobles in England and the subject of a verse biography in French, which often reads like a romance.

Of course, not all writing in Early Middle English depends on French sources or intermediaries. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continued to be written at the monastery of Peterborough. It is an invaluable witness for the changes taking place in the English language and allows us to see Norman rule from an English point of view. *The Owl and the Nightingale* (late twelfth century) is a witty and entertaining poem in which these two female birds engage in a fierce debate about the benefits their singing brings to humankind. The owl grimly reminds her rival of the sinfulness of the human condition, which her mournful song is intended to amend; the nightingale sings about the pleasures of life and love when lord and lady are in bed together. The poet, who was certainly a cleric, is well aware of the fashionable new romance literature; he specifically has the nightingale allude to Marie de France's lay *Laüstic*, the Breton word, she says, for "rossignol" in French and "nightingale" in English. The poet does not side with either bird; rather he has amusingly created the sort of dialectic between the discourses of religion and romance that is carried on throughout medieval literature. Selections from *The Owl and the Nightingale* are presented in the anthology, below.

There is also a body of Early Middle English religious prose aimed at women. Three saints' lives celebrate the heroic combats of virgin martyrs who suffer dismemberment and death; a tract titled *Holy Maidenhead* paints the woes of marriage not from the point of view of the husband, as in standard medieval antifeminist writings, but from that of the wife. Related to these texts, named the Katherine Group after one of the virgin martyrs, is a religious work also written for women but in a very different spirit. The *Ancrene Wisse* (Guide for Anchoresses) is one of the finest works of English religious prose in any period. It is a manual of instruction written at the request of three sisters who have chosen to live as religious recluses. The author, who may have been their personal confessor, addresses them with affection, and, at times, with kindness and humor. He is also profoundly serious in his analyses of sin, penance, and love. In the selection included here from his chapter on penance, he imagines the enclosed life in richly metaphorical ways, mixing pleasure strangely with pain.

LITERATURE OF THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

The styles of *The Owl and the Nightingale* and *Ancrene Wisse* show that around the year 1200 both poetry and prose were being written for sophisticated and well-educated readers whose primary language was English. Throughout the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, there are many kinds of evidence that although French continued to be the principal language of Parliament, law, business, and high culture, English was gaining ground. Several authors of religious and didactic works in English state that they are writing for the benefit of those who do not understand Latin or French.

Anthologies were made of miscellaneous works adapted from French for English readers and original pieces in English. Most of the nobility were by now bilingual, and the author of an English romance written early in the fourteenth century declares that he has seen many nobles who cannot speak French. Children of the nobility and the merchant class were now learning French as a second language. By the 1360s the linguistic, political, and cultural climate had been prepared for the flowering of Middle English literature in the writings of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the *Gawain* poet.

The Fourteenth Century

War and disease were prevalent throughout the Middle Ages but never more devastatingly than during the fourteenth century. In the wars against France, the gains of two spectacular English victories, at Crécy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356, were gradually frittered away in futile campaigns that ravaged the French countryside without obtaining any clear advantage for the English. In 1348 the first and most virulent epidemic of the bubonic plague—the Black Death—swept Europe, wiping out a quarter to a third of the population. The toll was higher in crowded urban centers. Giovanni Boccaccio's description of the plague in Florence, with which he introduces the

Decameron, vividly portrays its ravages: "So many corpses would arrive in front of a church every day and at every hour that the amount of holy ground for burials was certainly insufficient for the ancient custom of giving each body its individual place; when all the graves were full, huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries of the churches and into them the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds; and they were packed in there with dirt, one on top of another, like a ship's cargo, until the trench was filled." The resulting scarcity of labor and a sudden expansion of the possibilities for social mobility fostered popular discontent. In 1381 attempts to enforce wage controls and to collect oppressive new taxes provoked a rural uprising in Essex and Kent that dealt a profound shock to the English ruling class. The participants were for the most part tenant farmers, day laborers, apprentices, and rural workers not attached to the big manors. A few of the lower clergy sided with the rebels against their wealthy church superiors; the priest John Ball was among the leaders. The movement was quickly suppressed, but not before sympathizers in London had admitted the rebels through two city gates, which had been barred against them. The insurgents burned down the palace of the hated duke of Lancaster, and they summarily beheaded the archbishop of Canterbury and the treasurer of England, who had taken refuge in the Tower of London. The Church had become the target of popular resentment because it was among the greatest of the oppressive landowners and because of the wealth, worldliness, and venality of many of the higher clergy.



The City. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good Government in the City*, 1338–39. The extraordinary energies of urban culture are set in a dynamic relation of peace and competition: the external walls of the city protect against outside invasion, even as the skyscrapers compete for space and power within the city. For more information about this image, See the Image Gallery for this volume.

These calamities and upheavals nevertheless did not stem the growth of international trade and the influence of the merchant class. In the portrait of Chaucer's merchant, we see the budding of capitalism based on credit and interest. Cities like London ran their own affairs under politically powerful mayors and aldermen. Edward III, chronically in need of money to finance his wars, was obliged to negotiate for revenues with the Commons in the English Parliament, an institution that became a major political force during this period. A large part of the king's revenues depended on taxing the profitable export of English wool to the Continent. The Crown thus became involved in the country's economic affairs, and this involvement led to a need for capable administrators. These were no longer drawn mainly from the Church, as in the past, but from a newly educated laity that occupied a rank somewhere between that of the lesser nobility and the upper bourgeoisie. The career of Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400), who served Edward III and his successor Richard II in a number of civil posts, is typical of this class—with the exception that Chaucer was also a great poet.

In the fourteenth century, a few poets and intellectuals achieved the status and respect formerly accorded only to the ancients. Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes had dedicated their works to noble patrons and, in their role as narrators, address themselves as entertainers and sometimes as instructors to court audiences. Dante (1265–1321) made himself the protagonist of *The Divine Comedy*, the sacred poem, as he called it, in which he revealed the secrets of the afterlife. After his death, manuscripts of the work were provided with lengthy commentaries as though it were scripture, and public

readings and lectures were devoted to it. Francis Petrarch (1304–1374) won an international reputation as a man of letters. He wrote primarily in Latin and contrived to have himself crowned “poet laureate” in emulation of the Roman poets whose works he imitated, but his most famous work is the sonnet sequence he wrote in Italian. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) was among Petrarch’s most ardent admirers and carried on a literary correspondence with him.

Chaucer read these authors along with the ancient Roman poets and drew on them in his own works. Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* is based on a Latin version Petrarch made from the last tale in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*; in his prologue, the Clerk refers to Petrarch as “lauriat poete” whose sweet rhetoric illuminated all Italy with his poetry. Yet in his own time, the English poet Chaucer never attained the kind of laurels that he and others accorded to Petrarch. In his earlier works, Chaucer portrayed himself comically as a diligent reader of old books, as an aspiring apprentice writer, and as an eager spectator on the fringe of a fashionable world of courtiers and poets. In *The House of Fame*, he relates a dream of being snatched up by a huge golden eagle (the eagle and many other things in this work were inspired by Dante) that transports him to the palace of the goddess Fame. There he gets to see phantoms, like the shades in Dante’s poem, of all the famous authors of antiquity. At the end of his romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer asks his “litel book” to kiss the footsteps where the great ancient poets had passed before. Like Dante and Petrarch, Chaucer had an ideal of great poetry and, in his *Troilus* at least, strove to emulate it. But in *The House of Fame* and in his final work, *The Canterbury Tales*, he also views that ideal ironically and distances himself from it. The many surviving documents that record Geoffrey Chaucer’s career as a civil servant do not contain a single word to show that he was also a poet. Only in the following centuries would he be canonized as the father of English poetry.

Chaucer is unlikely to have known his contemporary William Langland (ca. 1330–1388), who says in an autobiographical passage (see [pp. 409–11](#)), added to the third and last version of his great poem *Piers Plowman*, that he lived in London on Cornhill (a poor

area of the city) among “lollers.” “Loller” was a slang term for the unemployed and transients; it was later applied to followers of the religious and social reformer John Wycliffe, some of whom were burned at the stake for heresy in the next century. Langland assailed corruption in church and state, but he was certainly no radical. It is thought that he may have written the third version of *Piers Plowman*, which tones down his attacks on the Church, after the rebels of 1381 invoked Piers as one of their own. Although Langland does not condone rebellion and his religion is not revolutionary, he nevertheless presents the most clear-sighted vision of social and religious issues in the England of his day. *Piers Plowman* is also a painfully honest search for the right way that leads to salvation. Though learned himself, Langland and the dreamer who represents him in the poem arrive at the insight that learning can be one of the chief obstacles on that way.

Langland came from the west of England, and his poem belongs to the “Alliterative Revival,” a final flowering in the late fourteenth century of the verse form that goes all the way back to pre-Conquest England. Early medieval traditions held out longest in the west and north, away from London, where Chaucer and his audience were more open to literary fashions from the Continent.

John Gower (ca. 1330–1408) is a third major late fourteenth-century English poet. While his first and second large works are written in French and Latin verse respectively, his *Confessio Amantis* (1390) is written in English four-stress couplets. Gower’s first two works are severe satires; the *Confessio*, by contrast, broaches political and ethical issues from an oblique angle. Its primary narrative concerns the treatment of a suffering lover. His therapy consists of listening to, and understanding, many other narratives, many of which are drawn from classical sources. Like Chaucer, Gower anglicizes and absorbs classical Latin literature.

Admiration for the poetry of both Chaucer and Gower and the controversial nature of Langland’s writing ensured the survival of their work in many manuscripts. The work of a fourth major fourteenth-century English poet, who remains anonymous, is known

only through a single manuscript, which contains four poems all thought to be by a single author: *Cleanness* and *Patience*, two biblical narratives in alliterative verse; *Pearl*, a moving dream vision in which a grief-stricken father is visited and consoled by his dead child, who has been transformed into a queen in the kingdom of heaven; and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the finest of all English romances. The plot of *Gawain* involves a folklore motif of a challenge by a supernatural visitor, first found in an Old Irish tale. The poet has made this motif a challenge to King Arthur's court and has framed the tale with allusions at the beginning and end to the legends that link Arthur's reign with the Trojan War and the founding of Rome and of Britain. The poet has a sophisticated awareness of romance as a literary genre and plays a game with both the hero's and the reader's expectations of what is supposed to happen in a romance. One could say that the broader subject of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "romance" itself, and in this respect the poem resembles Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in its author's interest in literary form.

Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–ca. 1416) is a fifth major writer of this period. The first known woman writer in the English vernacular, the anchoress Julian participates in a Continental tradition of visionary writings, often by women. She spent a good deal of her life meditating and writing about a series of visions, which she called "showings," that she had received in 1373, when she was thirty years old. While very carefully negotiating the dangers of writing as a woman, and of writing sophisticated theology in the vernacular, Julian manages to produce visionary writing that is at once penetrating and serene.

The Fifteenth Century

In 1399 Henry Bolingbroke, the Duke of Lancaster, deposed his cousin Richard II, who was murdered in prison. As Henry IV, he successfully defended his crown against several insurrections and passed it on to Henry V, who briefly united the country once more and achieved one last apparently decisive victory over the French at

the Battle of Agincourt (1415). The premature death of Henry V in 1422, however, left England exposed to the civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses, the red rose being the emblem of the house of Lancaster; the white, of York. These wars did not end until 1485, when the Lancastrian Henry Tudor defeated the Yorkist Richard III at Bosworth Field and acceded to the throne as Henry VII.

The most prolific poet of the fifteenth century was the monk John Lydgate (ca. 1371–1449), who produced dream visions; a life of the Virgin; translations of French religious allegories; a *Troy Book*; *The Siege of Thebes*, which he framed as a “new” Canterbury tale; and a thirty-six-thousand-line poem called *The Fall of Princes*, a free translation of a French work, itself based on a Latin work by Boccaccio. The last illustrates the late medieval idea of tragedy, namely that emperors, kings, and other famous men enjoy power and fortune only to be cast down in misery. Lydgate shapes these tales as a “mirror” for princes—that is, as object lessons to the powerful men of his own day, several of whom were his patrons. A self-styled imitator of Chaucer, Lydgate had a reputation almost equal to Chaucer’s in the fifteenth century. The other significant poet of the first half of the fifteenth century is Thomas Hoccleve (ca. 1367–1426). Like Lydgate, Hoccleve also wrote for powerful Lancastrian patrons, but his poetry is strikingly private, painfully concerned as it often is with his penury and mental instability. The searing poem *My Complaint* is an example of his work.

Religious works of all kinds continued to be produced in the fifteenth century, but under greater surveillance. The Lancastrian authorities responded to the reformist religious movement known as “Lollardy” in draconian ways. They introduced a statute for the burning of heretics (the first such statute) in 1401, and a series of measures designed to survey and censor theology in English in 1409. Despite this, many writers continued to produce religious works in the vernacular. Perhaps the most remarkable of these writers is Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–ca. 1438). Kempe made pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome, Santiago, and to shrines in northern Europe; she also visited Julian of Norwich in about 1413. These journeys she records, in the context of her often fraught and painful personal life,

in her *Book of Margery Kempe*. Both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, in highly individual ways, enable us to see the medieval church and its doctrines from female points of view.



The Seasons. Limbourg Brothers, "February," *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (ca. 1411–16). The calm inevitability of cosmic, seasonal change is set above the uncertain yet inventive struggle of peasants, in the main frame, for heat and food. (See the Image Gallery for this volume.)

Social, economic, and literary life continued as they had throughout all of the previously mentioned wars. The prosperity of the towns was shown by performances of the mystery plays—a sequence or "cycle" of plays based on the Bible and produced by the city guilds, the organizations representing the various trades and crafts. The cycles of several towns are lost, but those of York and Chester have been preserved, along with two other complete cycles, one possibly from Wakefield in Yorkshire, and the other titled the "N-Town" Cycle. Under the guise of dramatizing biblical history, playwrights such as the Wakefield Master manage to comment satirically on the social ills of the times. The century also saw the development of the morality play, in which personified vices and virtues struggle for the soul of "Mankind" or "Everyman." Performed by professional players, the morality plays were precursors of the professional theater that flourished in the reign of Elizabeth I.

The best of Chaucer's imitators was Robert Henryson (ca. 1425–ca. 1500), who, in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, wrote *The Testament of Cresseid*, a continuation of Chaucer's great poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. He also wrote the *Moral Fabillis of Esope*, among which is *The Cock and the Fox*, a remake of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

The works of Sir Thomas Malory (ca. 1415–1471) gave the definitive form in English to the legend of King Arthur and his knights. Malory spent years in prison rendering into English a series of Arthurian romances that he translated and abridged chiefly from several enormously long thirteenth-century French prose romances. Malory was a passionate devotee of chivalry, which he personified in his hero Sir Lancelot. In the jealousies and rivalries that finally break up the Round Table and destroy Arthur's kingdom, Malory saw a

distant image of the civil wars of his own time. A manuscript of Malory's works fell into the hands of William Caxton (ca. 1422–1492), who had introduced the new art of printing by movable type to England in 1476. Caxton divided Malory's tales into the chapters and books of a single long work, as though it were a chronicle history, and gave it the title *Morte Darthur*, which has stuck to it ever since. Caxton also printed *The Canterbury Tales*, some of Chaucer's earlier works, and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Caxton himself translated many of the works he printed for English readers: a history of Troy, a book on chivalry, Aesop's fables, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, and *The Game and Playe of Chesse*. The new technology extended literacy and made books more easily accessible to new classes of readers. Printing made the production of literature a business and made possible the bitter political and doctrinal disputes that, in the sixteenth century, were waged in print as well as on the field of battle.

MEDIEVAL ENGLISHES

The medieval works in this anthology were composed in different states of the language. Old English, the language that took shape among the Germanic settlers of England, preserved its integrity until the Norman Conquest radically altered English civilization. Middle English, the first records of which date from the early twelfth century, was continually changing. Shortly after the introduction of printing at the end of the fifteenth century, it attained the form designated as Early Modern English. Old English is a very heavily inflected language. (That is, the words change form to indicate changes in function, such as person, number, tense, case, mood, and so on. Most languages have some inflection—for example, the personal pronouns in Modern English have different forms when used as objects—but a “heavily inflected” language, such as Greek or Latin, is one in which almost all classes of words undergo elaborate patterns of change.) The vocabulary of Old English is almost entirely Germanic. In Middle English, the inflectional system was weakened, and a large number of words were introduced into it from French, so that many of the Old English words disappeared. Because of the difficulty of Old English, all selections from it in this book have been given in translation. So that the reader may see an example of the language, Cædmon’s *Hymn* has been printed in the original, together with an interlinear translation. The present discussion, then, is concerned primarily with the relatively late form of Middle English used by Chaucer and the East Midland dialect in which he wrote.

The chief difficulty with Middle English for the modern reader is caused not by its inflections so much as by its spelling, which may be described as a rough-and-ready phonetic system, and by the fact that it is not a single standardized language but consists of a number of regional dialects, each with its own peculiarities of sound and its own systems for representing sounds in writing. The East Midland dialect—the dialect of London and of Chaucer, which is the

ancestor of our own standard speech—differs greatly from the dialect spoken in the west of England (the original dialect of *Piers Plowman*), from that of the northwest (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), and from that of the north (*The Second Shepherds' Play*). In this book, the long texts composed in the more difficult dialects have been translated or modernized, and those that—like Chaucer, Gower, *Everyman*, and the lyrics—appear in the original, have been respelled in a way that is designed to aid the reader. The remarks that follow apply to Chaucer's East Midland English. Chaucer's texts are, with a little patience, readily accessible to readers of Modern English. The best way to absorb Chaucer's language is to read it slowly; to hear it in the inner ear; and to note grammatical distinctions, particularly in verb formation and in pronouns. The spelling of all Chaucer's texts has been modernized to maximize intelligibility.

The Sounds of Middle English: General Rules

The following general analysis of the sounds of Middle English will enable the reader who does not have time for detailed study to read Middle English aloud and preserve some of its most essential characteristics, without, however, worrying too much about details.

Middle English differs from Modern English in three principal respects: (1) the pronunciation of the long vowels *a*, *e*, *i* (or *y*), *o*, and *u* (spelled *ou*, *ow*); (2) the fact that Middle English final *e* is often sounded; and (3) the fact that all Middle English consonants are sounded.

1. LONG VOWELS

Middle English vowels are long when they are doubled (*aa*, *ee*, *oo*) or when they are terminal (*he*, *to*, *holy*); *a*, *e*, and *o* are long when followed by a single consonant plus a vowel (*name*, *mete*, *note*). Middle English vowels are short when they are followed by two consonants.

Long *a* is sounded like the *a* in Modern English "father": *maken*, *madd*.

Long *e* may be sounded like the *a* in Modern English “name” (ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *be*, *sweete*.

Long *i* (or *y*) is sounded like the *i* in Modern English “machine”: *lif*, *whit*, *myn*, *holy*.

Long *o* may be sounded like the *o* in Modern English “note” (again ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *do*, *soone*.

Long *u* (spelled *ou*, *ow*) is sounded like the *oo* in Modern English “goose”: *hous*, *flowr*.

Note that in general Middle English long vowels are pronounced like long vowels in modern European languages other than English. Short vowels and diphthongs, however, may be pronounced as in Modern English.

2. FINAL E

In Middle English syllabic verse, final *e* is sounded, like the *a* in “sofa,” to provide a needed unstressed syllable: *Another Nonnë with hire haddë she*. But (see *hire* in the example) final *e* is suppressed when not needed for the meter. It is commonly silent before words beginning with a vowel or *h*.

3. CONSONANTS

Middle English consonants are pronounced separately in all combinations—*gnat*: *g-nat*; *knave*: *k-nave*; *write*: *w-rite*; *folk*: *fol-k*. In a simplified system of pronunciation the combination *gh* as in *night* or *thought* may be treated as if it were silent.

THE METERS OF OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

All the poetry of Old English is in the same verse form. The verse unit is the single line, because rhyme was not used to link one line to another, except very occasionally in late Old English. The organizing device of the line is alliteration, the beginning of several words with the same sound ("Foemen fled"). The Old English alliterative line contains, on the average, four principal stresses and is divided into two half-lines of two stresses each by a strong medial caesura, or pause. These two half-lines are linked to each other by alliteration; at least one of the two stressed words in the first half-line, and often both of them, begin with the same sound as the first stressed word of the second half-line (the second stressed word is generally nonalliterative). The fourth line of *Beowulf* is an example (*sc* has the value of modern *sh*; *þ* is a runic symbol with the value of modern *th*):

Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum.

For further examples, see Cædmon's *Hymn*. It will be noticed that any vowel alliterates with any other vowel. In addition to the alliteration, the length of the unstressed syllables and their number and pattern is governed by a highly complex set of rules. When sung or intoned—as it was—to the rhythmic strumming of a harp, Old English poetry must have been wonderfully impressive in the dignified, highly formalized way that aptly fits both its subject matter and tone.

The majority of Middle English verse is either in alternately stressed rhyming verse, adapted from French after the Conquest, or in alliterative verse that is descended from Old English. The latter preserves the caesura of Old English and in its purest form the same alliterative system, the two stressed words of the first half-line (or at

least one of them) alliterating with the first stressed word in the second half-line. But most of the alliterative poets allowed themselves a number of deviations from the norm. All four stressed words may alliterate, as in the first line of *Piers Plowman*:

In a summer season when soft was the sun.

Or the line may contain five, six, or even more stressed words, of which all or only the basic minimum may alliterate:

A fair field full of folk found I there between.

There is no rule determining the number of unstressed syllables, and at times some poets seem to ignore alliteration entirely. As in Old English, any vowel may alliterate with any other vowel; furthermore, since initial *h* was silent or lightly pronounced in Middle English, words beginning with *h* are treated as though they began with the following vowel.

There are two general types of stressed verse with rhyme. In the more common, unstressed and stressed syllables alternate regularly, as x X x X x X; or with two unstressed syllables intervening, as x x X x x X; or a combination of the two, as x x X x X x x X (of the reverse patterns, only X x X x X x is common in English). There is also a line that can only be defined as containing a predetermined number of stressed syllables but an irregular number and pattern of unstressed syllables. Much Middle English verse has to be read without expectation of regularity; some of this was evidently composed in an irregular meter, but some was probably originally composed according to a strict metrical system that has been obliterated by scribes careless of fine points. One receives the impression that many of the lyrics—as well as the *Second Shepherds' Play*—were at least composed with regular syllabic alternation. In the play *Everyman*, only the number of stresses is generally predetermined but not the number or placement of unstressed syllables.

In pre-Chaucerian verse the number of stresses, whether regularly or irregularly alternated, was most often four, although sometimes the number was three and rose in some poems to seven. Rhyme in Middle English (as in Modern English) may be either between adjacent or alternate lines, or may occur in more complex patterns. Most of the *Canterbury Tales* are in rhymed couplets, the line containing five stresses with regular alternation—technically known as iambic pentameter, the standard English poetic line, perhaps introduced into English by Chaucer. In reading Chaucer and much pre-Chaucerian verse, one must remember that the final *e*, which is silent in Modern English, could be pronounced at any time to provide a needed unstressed syllable. Evidence seems to indicate that it was also pronounced at the end of the line, even though it thus produced a line with eleven syllables. Although he was a very regular metricist, Chaucer used various conventional devices that are apt to make the reader stumble until he or she understands them. Final *e* is often not pronounced before a word beginning with a vowel or *h*, and may be suppressed whenever metrically convenient. The same medial and terminal syllables that are slurred in Modern English are apt to be suppressed in Chaucer's English: *Canterb'ry* for *Canterbury*; *ev'r* (perhaps *e'er*) for *ever*. The plural in *es* may either be syllabic or reduced to *s* as in Modern English. Despite these seeming irregularities, Chaucer's verse is not difficult to read if one constantly bears in mind the basic pattern of the iambic pentameter line.

THE CANON OF OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

By “canon” of literature, we mean the set of texts that is regarded as the most important to be read, both in educational institutions and in a given culture more generally. Literature and canons of literature are formed differently. Gifted writers work from their own circumstances to project literature into the future. Canons of literature, by contrast, are produced by reflection on the past: What pasts, and what texts from those pasts, are most important to be read now? What set of texts tells us who we are? Those questions obviously embed questions of cultural authority: Who defines the past? How do we define “importance”? Who are “we”?

Such questions point to the adventure of canon formation; canons are not at all stable. As answers to these questions change, so too do canons change.

The canon of “Old and Middle English Literature” is a relatively recent, later nineteenth-century phenomenon. Between the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, religion was the driver of canon formation, and religion kept Old English apart from Middle English. Study of Old English writing began from the sixteenth century, in the effort to prove that a largely autonomous English Church—the “primitive Church”—with its vernacular scriptures, preexisted the domination of the Roman Church, with its Latin Scriptures, from the late twelfth century. The principal interests of this movement were to find evidence of a pre-Norman church relatively untouched by Roman “traditions,” and vernacular scriptures in prose. There was no interest in, or knowledge of, Old English poetic literature (the first transcription of *Beowulf* dates only from 1786).

This ecclesiological interest in Old English has its correlative lack of interest in Middle English. Sixteenth-century evangelical reformers thought that the power of the Roman Church was at its height

between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. Apart, then, from sixteenth-century editions of secular works by Lydgate and Gower, and the continuous printing of editions of Chaucer's works, there was no canon of Middle English literary texts until the late eighteenth century. All but the first of the editions of the works of Chaucer printed in 1532, 1542, 1550, 1561, 1598, 1602, 1687, and 1721 presented him as a proto-Protestant.

Once, however, the possibility of a Catholic monarch on the English throne was definitively neutralized in 1745–48 (the failed Jacobite Rebellion), English scholars began to look seriously for the first time at Middle English writing. Thus in 1774–81 Thomas Warton produced his brilliant *History of English Poetry*, where for the first time we have a history of specifically "literary" discourse, aiming to cover the period from the Norman Conquest to the end of the seventeenth century.

Old English and Middle English began to converge as a canon under the influence of nationalist philology, which began in Germany in the early nineteenth century. As different nations sought to define their distinctive qualities, so too they formed canons of vernacular literature. In Britain this meant canons of literature written in forms of English itself. The movement was in the first instance principally philological: many of the texts we recognize as part of the canon were first edited in order to feed the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which began in 1857.

The combined effect of philology, nationalism, and greater religious tolerance, along with the formation of a discursive category of "literature," thus produced the conditions for canon formation of "English literature." Old and Middle English were a significant part of this formation, particularly from the late nineteenth century, when university departments of English literature, which needed curricula and a canon, began in both Britain and the United States.

Since the early twentieth century, the canon has undergone significant reformations under the influence of powerful cultural movements. Thus from the 1970s feminism ushered English women writers (for example, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe) into the

canon of vernacular English literature; and from the 1980s the greater Europeanization of English culture (now challenged by Brexit) opened the canon of non-English-language insular writing in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Celtic literatures. Used across the twentieth century as a descriptor for a scholarly field, the term “Anglo-Saxon” itself has undergone a significant reformation: scholars have recently tended to avoid the term on account of its longer and more tendentiously nationalist usage.

THE MIDDLE AGES

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
	<p>43–ca. 420 Romans conquer Britons; Britannia a province of the Roman Empire</p> <p>312–80 Acceptance of Christianity in Roman Empire, beginning with conversion of Constantine the Great (312), culminating in its adoption as state religion (380)</p>
<p>ca. 405 St. Jerome completes the <i>Vulgate</i>, a Latin translation of the Bible that becomes standard for the Roman Catholic Church</p>	
	<p>432 St. Patrick begins mission to convert Ireland</p>
	<p>ca. 450 Angles' and Saxons' conquest of Britons begins</p>
<p>523 Boethius, <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i> (Latin)</p>	

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
	597 St. Augustine of Canterbury's mission to Kent begins re-conversion of English to Christianity
	622–750 Spread of Islam through Middle East, North Africa, and Spain
ca. 658–80 Caedmon's <i>Hymn</i> , earliest poem recorded in English	
731 Bede completes <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> (Latin)	
? ca. 750–850 <i>Beowulf</i> composed	
ca. 787 First Viking raids on England	
871–99 Texts written or commissioned by King Alfred	871–99 Reign of King Alfred

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1000 Unique manuscript of <i>Beowulf</i> and <i>Judith</i>	
	1066 Norman Conquest by William I establishes French-speaking ruling class in England
	1095–1099 First Crusade, European conquest of Jerusalem
ca. 1135–38 Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin <i>History of the Kings of Britain</i> gives pseudo-historical status to Arthurian and other legends	
	1152 Future Henry II marries Eleanor of Aquitaine, bringing vast French territories to the English Crown
1154 Final entry in the <i>Peterborough Chronicle</i> , latest Old English historical record	

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1155–60 Thomas of England, <i>Le Roman de Tristan</i>	
? ca. 1165–80 Marie de France, <i>Lais</i> , in Anglo-Norman French from Breton sources	
ca. 1170–91 Chrétien de Troyes, chivalric romances about knights of the Round Table (French)	1170 Archbishop Thomas Becket murdered in Canterbury Cathedral, the outcome of bitter struggle between Church and Crown
ca. 1180 Clemence of Barking, <i>The Life of Saint Catherine</i>	1187 Surrender of Jerusalem to Muslim forces
late twelfth century <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	1189–90 Anti-Semitic rioting in England, resulting in massacre of the entire Jewish community in York
ca. 1200 Layamon's <i>Brut</i>	
	1210 Founding of the Franciscan Order, led by St. Francis of Assisi

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1215–25 <i>Ancrene Wisse</i>	
fl. late thirteenth century Meir of Norwich	1290 Expulsion of Jews from England, by royal decree
ca. 1300 <i>Sir Orfeo</i>	1291 Fall of the city of Acre, ending Crusader presence in the Middle East
ca. 1304–21 Dante Alighieri writing <i>Divine Comedy</i> (Italian)	
ca. 1330–40 Production of Auchinleck Manuscript in London, containing the romance <i>King of Tars</i>	
ca. 1340–74 Giovanni Boccaccio active as writer in Naples and Florence. Francis Petrarch active as writer	
	1348–49 Black Death ravages Europe

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1351–70 Composition of <i>Book of John Mandeville</i> , probably in Anglo-Norman French	
	1362 English language first used in law courts and Parliament
ca. 1369 Chaucer, first known work, <i>Book of the Duchess</i>	
	1372 Chaucer's first journey to Italy
1373–93 Julian of Norwich, <i>Book of Showings</i>	
ca. 1375–1400 <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	
	1376 Earliest record of performance of cycle drama at York

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
1377–79 William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> (B-Text)	
ca. 1380 Followers of John Wycliffe begin first complete translation of the Bible into English	
	1381 People's uprising briefly takes control of London before being suppressed
ca. 1387–99 Chaucer composing <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	
ca. 1390–92 John Gower, <i>The Lover's Confession</i>	
	1399 Richard II deposed by his cousin, who succeeds him as Henry IV
	1400 Richard II murdered

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
	1401 Execution of William Sawtre, first Lollard burned at the stake under new law against heresy
ca. 1410–49 John Lydgate active	
	1415 Henry V defeats French at Agincourt
ca. 1420 Thomas Hoccleve, <i>My Complaint</i>	
ca. 1425 <i>York Play of the Crucifixion</i>	
	1431 English burn Joan of Arc at Rouen
ca. 1432–38 Margery Kempe, <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i>	

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
ca. 1450–75 Wakefield mystery cycle, <i>Second Shepherds' Play</i>	
	1455–85 Wars of the Roses
ca. 1470 Sir Thomas Malory in prison working on <i>Morte Darthur</i>	
ca. 1475 Robert Henryson active	
	1476 William Caxton sets up first printing press in England
1485 Caxton publishes <i>Morte Darthur</i> , one of the first books in English to be printed	1485 The Earl of Richmond defeats the Yorkist king, Richard III, at Bosworth Field and succeeds him as Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty
ca. 1510 <i>Everyman</i>	

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
	1575 Last performance of cycle plays at Chester

Literature of the Early Middle Ages (eighth to eleventh centuries)

BEDE (ca. 673–735) and CÆDMON'S *HYMN*

The Venerable Bede (the title by which he is known to posterity) became a novice at the age of seven and spent the rest of his life at the twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow. Although he may never have traveled beyond the boundaries of his native district of Northumbria, he achieved an international reputation as one of the greatest scholars of his age. Writing in Latin, the learned language of the era, Bede produced many theological works as well as books on science and rhetoric, but his most popular and enduring work is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed 731). The *History* relates the German conquest and the vicissitudes of the petty kingdoms that made up the England of the Saxons and Angles; Bede's main theme, however, is the spread of Christianity and the growth of the English Church. The latter were the great events leading up to Bede's own time, and he regarded them as the unfolding of God's providence. The *History* is, therefore, also a moral work and a hagiography—that is, it contains many stories of saints and miracles meant to testify to the grace and glory of God.

The story we reprint preserves what is probably the earliest extant Old English poem (composed sometime between 658 and 680) and the only biographical information, outside of what is said in the poems themselves, about any Old English poet. Bede tells how Cædmon, an illiterate cowherd employed by the monastery of Whitby, miraculously received the gift of song, entered the

monastery, and became the founder of a school of Christian poetry. Cædmon was clearly an oral-formulaic poet, one who created his work by combining and varying formulas—units of verse developed in a tradition transmitted by one generation of singers to another. In this respect he resembles the singers of the Homeric poems and oral-formulaic poets recorded in the twentieth century, especially in the Balkan countries. Although Bede tells us that Cædmon had never learned the art of song, we may suspect that he concealed his skill from his fellow workmen and from the monks because he was ashamed of knowing “vain and idle” songs, the kind Bede says Cædmon never composed. Cædmon’s inspiration and the true miracle, then, was to apply the meter and language of such songs, presumably including pagan heroic verse, to Christian themes.

Although most Old English poetry was written by lettered poets, they continued to use the oral-formulaic style. The *Hymn* is, therefore, a good short example of the way Old English verse, with its traditional poetic diction and interwoven formulaic expressions, is constructed. Eight of the poem’s eighteen half-lines contain epithets describing various aspects of God: He is *Weard* (Guardian), *Meotod* (Measurer), *Wuldor-Fæder* (Glory-Father), *Drihten* (Lord), *Scyppend* (Creator), and *Frea* (Master). God is *heofonrices Weard* or *mancynnes Weard* (heaven’s or mankind’s Guardian), depending on the alliteration required. This formulaic style provides a richness of texture and meaning difficult to convey in translation. As Bede said about his own Latin paraphrase of the *Hymn*, no literal translation of poetry from one language to another is possible without sacrifice of some poetic quality.

Several manuscripts of Bede’s *History* contain the Old English text in addition to Bede’s Latin version. The poem is given here in a West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation. In Old English spelling, æ (as in Cædmon’s name and line 3) is a vowel symbol that represents the vowel of Modern English *cat*; þ (line 2) and ð (line 7) both represented the sound *th*. The spelling *sc* (line 1) = *sh*; *ġ* (line 1) = *y* in *yard*; *ċ* (line 1) = *ch* in *chin*; *c* (line 2) = *k*. The space in

the middle of the line indicates the caesura. The alliterating sounds that connect the half-lines are printed in bold italics.

From An Ecclesiastical History of the English People

[THE STORY OF CÆDMON]

Heavenly grace had especially singled out a certain one of the brothers in the monastery ruled by this abbe¹ss for he used to compose devout and religious songs. Whatever he learned of holy Scripture with the aid of interpreters, he quickly turned into the sweetest and most moving poetry in his own language, that is to say English. It often happened that his songs kindled a contempt for this world and a longing for the life of Heaven in the hearts of many men. Indeed, after him others among the English people tried to compose religious poetry, but no one could equal him because he was not taught the art of song by men or by human agency but received this gift through heavenly grace. Therefore, he was never able to compose any vain and idle songs but only such as dealt with religion and were proper for his religious tongue to utter. As a matter of fact, he had lived in the secular estate until he was well advanced in age without learning any songs. Therefore, at feasts, when it was decided to have a good time by taking turns singing, whenever he would see the harp getting close to his place,² he got up in the middle of the meal and went home.

Once when he left the feast like this, he went to the cattle shed, which he had been assigned the duty of guarding that night. And after he had stretched himself out and gone to sleep, he dreamed that someone was standing at his side and greeted him, calling out his name. "Cædmon," he said, "sing me something."

And he replied, "I don't know how to sing; that is why I left the feast to come here—because I cannot sing."

"All the same," said the one who was speaking to him, "you have to sing for me."

"What must I sing?" he said.

And he said, "Sing about the Creation."

At this, Cædmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator, which he had never heard before and of which the sense is this:

Nu sculon **herigean** **heofonriCES** Weard
Now we must praise heaven-kingdom's Guardian,

Meotodes **meahte** and his **modgepanc**
the Measurer's might and his mind-plans,

weorc **Wuldor-Fæder** swa he **wundra** geh**wæs**
the work of the Glory-Father, when he of wonders of every
one,

eCe Drihten **or onstealde**
eternal Lord, the beginning established.³

He **ærest** sceop **ielda**⁴ bearnum
He first created for men's sons

heofon to hrofe **halig** Scyppend
heaven as a roof, holy Creator;

ða **middangeard** **moncynnes** Weard
then middle-earth mankind's Guardian,

eCe Drihten **æfter** teode
eternal Lord, afterwards made—

firum foldan **Fre**a ælmihtig
for men earth, Master almighty.

This is the general sense but not the exact order of the words that he sang in his sleep;⁵ for it is impossible to make a literal translation, no matter how well-written, of poetry into another language without

losing some of the beauty and dignity. When he woke up, he remembered everything that he had sung in his sleep, and to this he soon added, in the same poetic measure, more verses praising God.

The next morning he went to the reeve,⁶ who was his foreman, and told him about the gift he had received. He was taken to the abbeys and ordered to tell his dream and to recite his song to an audience of the most learned men so that they might judge what the nature of that vision was and where it came from. It was evident to all of them that he had been granted the heavenly grace of God. Then they expounded some bit of sacred story or teaching to him, and instructed him to turn it into poetry if he could. He agreed and went away. And when he came back the next morning, he gave back what had been commissioned to him in the finest verse.

Therefore, the abbess, who cherished the grace of God in this man, instructed him to give up secular life and to take monastic vows. And when she and all those subject to her had received him into the community of brothers, she gave orders that he be taught the whole sequence of sacred history. He remembered everything that he was able to learn by listening, and turning it over in his mind like a clean beast that chews the cud,⁷ he converted it into sweetest song, which sounded so delightful that he made his teachers, in their turn, his listeners. He sang about the creation of the world and the origin of the human race and all the history of Genesis; about the exodus of Israel out of Egypt and entrance into the promised land; and about many other stories of sacred Scripture, about the Lord's incarnation, and his passion,⁸ resurrection, and ascension into Heaven; about the advent of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the apostles. He also made many songs about the terror of the coming judgment and the horror of the punishments of hell and the sweetness of heavenly kingdom; and a great many others besides about divine grace and justice in all of which he sought to draw men away from the love of sin and to inspire them with delight in the practice of good works.⁹ * * *

Endnotes

- Note 1: Abbess Hilda (614–680), a grandniece of the first Christian king of Northumbria, founded Whitby, a double house for monks and nuns, in 657 and ruled over it for twenty-two years.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Oral poetry was performed to the accompaniment of a harp; here the harp is being passed from one participant of the feast to another, each being expected to perform in turn.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, established the beginning of every one of the wonders.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The later manuscript copies read *eorpan*, “earth,” for *ælda* (West Saxon *ielda*), “men’s.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Bede is referring to his Latin translation, for which we have substituted the Old English text with interlinear translation.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Superintendent of the farms belonging to the monastery.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In Mosaic law “clean” animals, those that may be eaten, are those that both chew the cud and have a cloven hoof (see Leviticus 11:3 and Deuteronomy 14:6).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The suffering of Christ beginning on the night of the Last Supper and culminating with his death.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The great majority of extant Old English poems are on religious subjects like those listed here, but most are thought to be later than Cædmon.[Return to reference 9](#)

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD



Ruthwell Cross, Ruthwell, Scotland, ca. 8th century. Not only is the cross sculpted with Christian images; it also has lines from *The Dream of the Rood* inscribed in runic letters. They may have been added at a later date.

The Dream of the Rood (that is, of the Cross) is considered the finest of a large number of religious poems in Old English. Neither the author nor its date of composition is known. It appears in a late tenth-century manuscript located in Vercelli in northern Italy, a manuscript made up of Old English religious poems and sermons. The poem may have been written earlier than its manuscript, because some passages from the Rood's speech were carved, with some variations, in runes on a stone cross at some time after its construction early in the eighth century; this is the famous Ruthwell Cross, preserved near Dumfries in southern Scotland. The precise relation of the poem to this cross is, however, uncertain.

The experience of the Rood, often called "tree" in the poem—its humiliation at the hands of those who cut it down and made it into an instrument of punishment for criminals and its humility when the young hero Christ mounts it—has a suggestive relevance to the condition of the Dreamer. His isolation and melancholy are typical of exile figures in Old English poetry. For the Rood, however, glory has replaced torment, and at the end, the Dreamer's description of Christ's entry into heaven with the souls he has liberated from hell reflects the Dreamer's response to the hope that has been brought to him. Christ and the Rood both act in keeping with, and yet diametrically opposed to, a code of heroic action: Christ is both heroic in mounting and passive in suffering on the Rood, while the Rood is loyal to its lord, yet must participate in his death.

The Dream of the Rood¹

Attend to what I intend to tell you
a marvelous dream that moved me at night
when human voices are veiled in sleep.
In my dream I espied the most splendid tree
looming aloft with light all around,
5 the most brilliant beam. That bright tree was
covered with gold; gemstones gleamed
fairly fashioned down to its foot, yet another five
were standing²
high up on the crossbeam —the Lord's angel
beheld them³—
cast by eternal decree. Clearly this was no
10 criminal's gallows,⁴
but holy spirits were beholding it there,
men on this earth, all that mighty creation.
That tree was triumphant and I tarnished by sin,
begrimed with evil. I beheld Glory's trunk
garnished with grandeur, gleaming in bliss,
15 all plated with gold; precious gemstones
had gloriously graced the Lord God's tree.
Yet I could see signs of ancient strife:
beneath that gold it had begun
bleeding on the right side.⁵ I was all bereft with
20 sorrows;
that splendid sight made me afraid. I beheld the
sign rapidly
changing clothing and colors. Now it was covered
with moisture,
drenched with streaming blood, now decked in
treasure.

Yet I, lying there for a long time,
sorrowfully beheld the tree of our Savior
25 until I could hear it call out to me,
the best of all wood began speaking words:
“That was years ago —I yet remember—
that I was cut down at the edge of the forest
torn up from my trunk. There powerful enemies
30 took me,
put me up to make a circus-play to lift up and
parade their criminals.
Soldiers bore me on their shoulders till they set
me up on a mountain;
more than enough foes made me stand fast. I saw
the lord of mankind
coming with great haste so that he might climb up
on me.
35 Then I did not dare act against the Lord’s word,
bow down or fall to pieces when I felt the surface
of the earth trembling.⁶ Although I might
have destroyed the foes, I stood in place.
Then this young man stripped himself —that was
God Almighty—
strong and courageous; he climbed up on the high
40 gallows,
brave in the sight of many, as he set out to
redeem mankind.
I trembled when the man embraced me; I dared
not bow down to earth,
stoop to the surface of the ground, but I had to
stand fast.
I was reared a rood; I raised up a mighty king,
the heavens’ lord; I dared not bow in homage.
45 They drove dark nails into me; the dints of those
wounds can still be seen,

open marks of malice; but I did not dare maul any
of them in return.

They mocked both of us. I was moistened all over
with blood,
shed from the man's side after he had sent up his
spirit.

50 On that mountain I have endured many
cruel happenings. I saw the God of hosts
direly stretched out. Shades of darkness
had clouded over the corpse of the Lord,
the shining radiance; shadows went forth
dark under clouds. All creation wept,
55 mourning the king's fall: Christ was on the cross.

"Yet from afar fervent men came
to that sovereign. I saw all that.
I was badly burdened with grief yet bowed down
to their hands,
60 submissive with most resolve. There they took up
almighty God,
lifted him from that cruel torment. Then the
warriors left me there
standing, blood all over me, pierced everywhere
with arrows.

They laid him there, limb-wearied; they stood at
the head of his lifeless body.
There they beheld the lord of heaven, and he
65 rested there for a while,
spent after that great struggle. Then they set
about to construct a sepulcher,
warriors in the slayer's⁷ sight. Out of bright stone
they carved it;
they laid the lord of victories into it. They began
singing a lay of sorrow,
warriors sad as night was falling, when they
wished to journey back

70 warily far from that famous lord; he rested there
 with few followers.⁸

 We,⁹ grieving there for a good while,
 stood still in place; the soldiers' voices
 faded away. Finally men brought axes
 to fell us to earth. That was a frightful destiny!
75 They buried us in a deep pit. But thanes^o of the
 Lord,

 friends learned about me¹ * * *

 * * * adorned me with gold and silver.

 "Now, man so dear to me, you may
 understand

 that I have gone through grievous sufferings,
 terrible sorrows. Now the time has come
80 so that far and wide men worship me
 everywhere on earth, and all creation
 pray to this sign. On me the son of God
 suffered a time; therefore I now tower
 in glory under heaven, and I may heal
85 any one of those in awe of me.

 Long ago I became the most cruel punishment,
 most hated by men, until I made open
 the right way of life to language-bearers.
 So the lord of glory, guardian of Heaven,
90 exalted me then over all forest-trees,
 as Almighty God before all humankind
 exalted over all the race of women
 His own mother, Mary herself.

 "Now I command you, my man so dear,
95 to tell others the events you have seen;
 find words to tell it was the tree of glory
 Almighty God suffered upon
 for mankind's so many sins
 and for that ancient offense of Adam.

100 There he tasted death; yet the Redeemer arose

with his great might to help mankind.
Then he rose to Heaven. He will come again
to this middle-earth to seek out mankind
on Judgment Day, the Redeemer himself,
105 God Almighty and his angels with him,
so that He will judge, He who has power of the
Judgment,
all humanity as to the merits each
has brought about in this brief life.
Nor may anyone be unafraid
110 of the last question the Lord will ask.
Before the multitude he will demand
where a soul might be who in the Savior's name
would suffer the death He suffered on that tree.
But they shall fear and few shall think
115 what to contrive to say to Christ.
But no one there need be afraid
who bears the best sign on his breast.
And on this earth each soul that longs
to exist with its savior forevermore
120 must seek His kingdom through that cross."
Then compelled by joy, I prayed to that tree
with ardent zeal, where I was alone
with few followers. Then my heart felt
an urge to set forth; I have suffered
125 much longing since. Now I live in hope,
venturing after that victory-tree,
alone more often than all other men,
to worship it well. The will to do so
is much in my heart; my protection
130 depends on the rood. I possess but few
friends on this earth. But forth from here
they have set out from worldly joys to seek the
King of Glory.
They dwell in Heaven now with the High-father
living in glory, and I look forward

135 constantly toward that time the Lord's rood
 which I beheld before here on this earth
 shall fetch me away from this fleeting life
 and bring me then where bliss is eternal
 140 to joy in Paradise where the Lord's people
 are joined at that feast where joy lasts forever
 and seat me there where evermore
 I shall dwell in glory, together with the saints
 share in their delights. May the Lord be my friend,
 145 who on earth long ago on the gallows-tree
 suffered agony for the sins of men:
 he redeemed us and gave us life,
 a home in Heaven. Hope was made new
 and blossomed with bliss to those burning in
 fire.²
 150 The Son was victorious in venturing forth,
 mighty and triumphant when he returned with
 many,
 a company of souls to the Kingdom of God,
 the Almighty Ruler, to the joy of angels,
 and all those holy ones come to Heaven before,³
 155 to live in glory, when their Lord returned,
 the Eternal King to His own country.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope, revised by R. D. Fulk (2000). As in the Old English riddles (see pp. 129–30), an inanimate object here assumes a voice, in this case to disclose a surprising and moving perspective on sacred history.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This longer line and the two following, as well as lines 20–23, 30–34, 39–43, 46–49, 59–70, 75–76, and 133, contain additional stresses and are designated as “hypermetric.” Fewer

than 500 such lines survive in the corpus of Old English poetry.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The translation follows R. D. Fulk's emendation: "beheold on þam engel dryhtnes."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Constantine the Great, emperor from 306 to 337, erected a jeweled cross at the site of the crucifixion, transforming the Roman "felon's gallows" from a symbol of shame into a universal icon of Christian art.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: According to biblical tradition, following John 19:34, Christ was wounded by a Roman military officer's lance on the right side.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: According to Matthew 27:51, the earth quaked at the crucifixion.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the Cross. See John 19:41–42.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An example of Old English litotes, ironically expressing something by its contrary. In fact, Christ's tomb is now deserted.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, Christ's Cross and those on which the two thieves had been crucified.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The reference in this gap in the manuscript must be to the discovery of the Cross by St. Helena.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This line and those following refer to the so-called Harrowing of Hell. After his death on the Cross, Christ descended into hell, from which he released the souls of certain patriarchs and prophets, conducting them into heaven (see *Piers Plowman*, Passus 18). The analogy is to the triumphal procession of a Roman emperor returning from war.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The line probably refers to a belief that God had sanctified a chosen few before the crucifixion.[Return to reference 3](#)

Notes

- °: *retainers* [Return to reference °](#)

BEOWULF

Beowulf, the oldest of the great long poems written in English, may have been composed more than twelve hundred years ago, in the first half of the eighth century, although some scholars would place it as late as the tenth century. As is the case with most Old English poems, the title has been assigned by modern editors, for the manuscripts do not normally give any indication of title or authorship. Linguistic evidence shows that the poem was originally composed in the dialect of what was then Mercia, the Midlands of England today. But in the unique late tenth-century manuscript preserving the poem, it has been converted into the West-Saxon dialect of the southwest in which most of Old English literature survives. In 1731, before any modern transcript of the text had been made, the manuscript was seriously damaged in a fire that destroyed the building in London that housed the extraordinary collection of medieval English manuscripts made by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631). As a result of the fire and subsequent deterioration, a number of lines and words have been lost from the poem.

129 PÆT PE LARDE

na in 7 ear dagum. þeod cýninga
þrym 7e ffrumon huda æþelinas elen
fre medon. oft scýld scepmz sceape
þreatum mone 7u mæþum meodo secl
of tearh esode eopl syddan ærest þe
fe sceapz funden. he þæs ffrorpe seba
peox under polcnum peopð myndum þah
od þ him æghpyle þara ymb sittendpa
of e hron. rade hypan scolde zomban
zyl dan þæs god cýning. ðam æftera þas
æfter cenned zcong in 7 ear dum þone god
sende folce to ffrorpe fýren ðearpe on
zeat þhe ærdrigon aldon ðise. lange
hpile him þæs lif ffræ puldræf pealdend
popold aþe for 7ear. beapule þæs þren
blæd pide sppanz seyl ða eapra seode
landum in. Spa secling. 7ma god
7e pýrcean ffrumum peoh 7e 7u anpa

Beowulf. The opening page. Note the charred edges, caused by a fire in 1731.

It is possible that *Beowulf* may be the lone survivor of a genre of Old English long epics, but it must have been a remarkable and difficult work even in its own day. The poet was reviving the heroic language, style, and pagan world of ancient Germanic oral poetry, a world that was already remote to his contemporaries and that is stranger to the modern reader, in many respects, than the epic world of Homer and Virgil. With the help of *Beowulf* itself, a few shorter heroic poems in Old English, and later poetry and prose in Old Saxon, Old Icelandic, and Middle High German, we can only conjecture what Germanic oral epic must have been like when performed by the Germanic *scop*, or bard. The *Beowulf* poet himself imagines such oral performances by having King Hrothgar's court poet recite a heroic lay at a feast celebrating Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Many of the words and formulaic expressions in *Beowulf* can be found in other Old English poems, but there are also an extraordinary number of what linguists call *hapax legomena*—that is, words recorded only once in a language. The poet may have found them elsewhere, but the high incidence of such words suggests that he was an original wordsmith in his own right.

Although the poem itself is English in language and origin, it deals not with Germanic inhabitants of England but with their forebears, especially with two south Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats, who lived on the Danish island of Zealand and in southern Sweden. Thus the historical period the poem concerns—insofar as it may be said to refer to history at all—is some centuries before it was written: that is, a time after the initial invasion of England by Germanic tribes in the middle of the fifth century but before the migration of Angles and Saxons was completed. The one datable fact of history mentioned in the poem is a raid on the Franks in which Hygelac, the king of the Geats and Beowulf's lord, was killed, and this raid occurred in the year 520. Yet the poet's elliptical references to quasihistorical and legendary material show that his

audience was still familiar with many old stories, the outlines of which we can only infer, sometimes with the help of later analogous tales in other Germanic languages. This knowledge was probably kept alive by other heroic poetry, of which little has been preserved in English, although much may once have existed.

It is now widely believed that *Beowulf* is the work of a single poet who was a Christian and that his poem reflects well-established Christian tradition. The conversion of the Germanic settlers in England had been largely completed during the seventh century. The Danish king Hrothgar's poet sings a song about the Creation (lines 87–98) reminiscent of Cædmon's *Hymn*. The monster Grendel is said to be a descendant of Cain. There are allusions to God's judgment and to fate (*wyrd*) but none to polytheistic deities. References to the New Testament are notably absent, but Hrothgar and Beowulf often speak of God as though their religion is monotheistic. With sadness the poet relates that, made desperate by Grendel's attacks, the Danes pray for help at heathen shrines—apparently backsliding just as the children of Israel had sometimes lapsed into idolatry.



Early medieval helmet, 6th to 7th centuries. Excavated at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk.

Although Hrothgar and Beowulf are portrayed as morally upright and enlightened pagans, they fully espouse and frequently affirm the

values of Germanic heroic poetry. In the poetry depicting this warrior society, the most important of human relationships was that which existed between the warrior—the thane—and his lord, a relationship based less on subordination of one man's will to another's than on mutual trust and respect. When a warrior vowed loyalty to his lord, he became not so much his servant as his voluntary companion, one who would take pride in defending him and fighting in his wars. In return, the lord was expected to take care of his thanes and to reward them richly for their valor; a good king, one like Hrothgar or Beowulf, is referred to by such poetic epithets as "ring-giver" and as the "helmet" and "shield" of his people.

The relationship between kinsmen was also of deep significance to this society. If one of his kinsmen had been slain, a man had a moral obligation either to kill the slayer or to exact the payment of *wergild* (man-price) in compensation. Each rank of society was evaluated at a definite price, which had to be paid to the dead man's kin by the killer if he wished to avoid their vengeance—even if the killing had been an accident. In the absence of any legal code other than custom or any body of law enforcement, it was the duty of the family (often with the lord's support) to execute justice. The payment itself had less significance as wealth than as proof that the kinsmen had done what was right. The failure to take revenge or to exact compensation was considered shameful. Hrothgar's anguish over the murders committed by Grendel is not only for the loss of his men but also for the shame of his inability either to kill Grendel or to exact a "death-price" from the killer. "It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (lines 1384–85), Beowulf says to Hrothgar, who has been thrown back into despair by the revenge-slaying of his old friend Aeschere by Grendel's mother.

Yet the young Beowulf's attempt to comfort the bereaved old king by invoking the code of vengeance may be one of several instances of the poet's ironic treatment of the tragic futility of never-ending blood feuds. The most graphic example in the poem of that irony is the Finnsburg episode, the lay sung by Hrothgar's hall-poet. The Danish princess Hildeburh, married to the Frisian king Finn—probably to put an end to a feud between those peoples—loses both her

brother and her son when a bloody fight breaks out in the hall between a visiting party of Danes and her husband's men. The bodies are cremated together on a huge funeral pyre: "The glutton element flamed and consumed / the dead of both sides. Their great days were gone" (lines 1124–25).

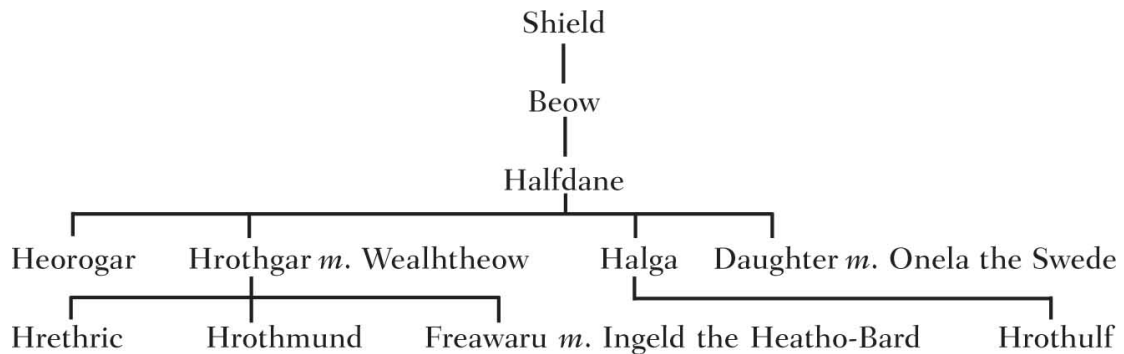
Such feuds, the staple subject of Germanic epic and saga, have only a peripheral place in the poem. Instead, the poem turns on Beowulf's three great fights against preternatural evil, which inhabits the dangerous and demonic space surrounding human society. He undertakes the fight against Grendel to save the Danes from the monster and to exact vengeance for the men Grendel has slain. Another motive is to demonstrate his strength and courage and thereby to enhance his personal glory. Hrothgar's magnificent gifts become the material emblems of that glory. Revenge and glory also motivate Beowulf's slaying of Grendel's mother. He undertakes his last battle against the dragon, however, only because there is no other way to save his own people.

A somber and dignified elegiac mood pervades *Beowulf*. The poem opens and closes with the description of a funeral and is filled with laments for the dead. Our first view of Beowulf is of an ambitious young hero. At the end, he has become an old king, facing the dragon and death. His people mourn him and praise him, as does the poet, for his nobility, generosity, courage, and, what is less common in Germanic heroes, kindness to his people. The poet's elegiac tone may be informed by something more than the duty to "praise a prince whom he holds dear / and cherish his memory when that moment comes / when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home" (lines 3175–77). The entire poem could be viewed as the poet's lament for heroes like Beowulf who went into the darkness without the light of the poet's own Christian faith.

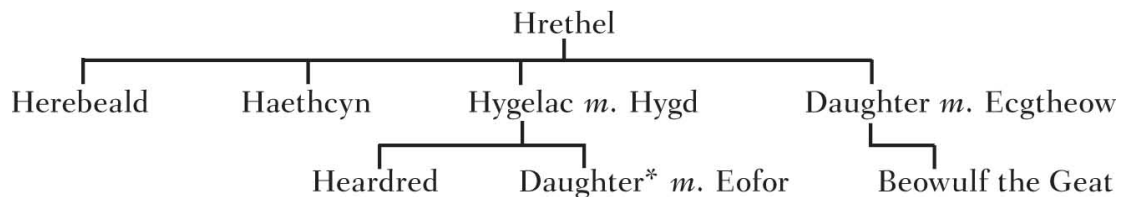
The verse translation here is by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. Selections from Heaney's own poems appear in Volume F of this anthology.

TRIBES AND GENEALOGIES

1. *The Danes (Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, North-, East-, South-, West-Danes; Shieldings, Honor-, Victor-, War-Shieldings; Ing's friends)*

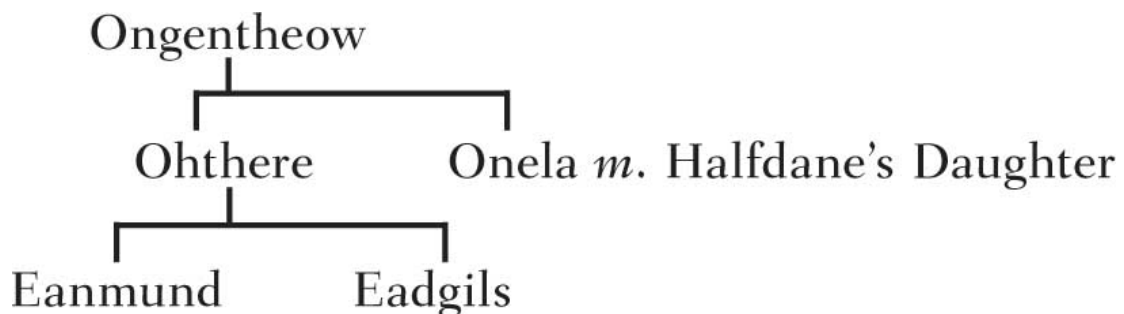


2. *The Geats (Sea-, War-, Weather-Geats)*



*The daughter of Hygelac who was given to Eofor may have been born to him by a former wife, older than Hygd.

3. *The Swedes*



4. Miscellaneous

A. The Half-Danes (also called Shieldings) involved in the fight at Finnsburg may represent a different tribe from the Danes described above. Their king Hoc had a son, Hnaef, who succeeded him, and a daughter Hildeburh, who married Finn, king of the Jutes.

B. The Jutes or Frisians are represented as enemies of the Danes in the fight at Finnsburg and as allies of the Franks or Hugas at the time Hygelac the Geat made the attack in which he lost his life and from which Beowulf swam home. Also allied with the Franks at this time were the Hetware.

C. The Heatho-Bards (that is, "Battle-Bards") are represented as inveterate enemies of the Danes. Their king Froda had been killed in an attack on the Danes, and Hrothgar's attempt to make peace with them by marrying his daughter Freawaru to Froda's son Ingeld failed when the latter attacked Heorot. The attack was repulsed, although Heorot was burned.

The Poet's Song in Heorot

To give the reader a sample of the language, style, and texture of *Beowulf* in the original, we print the following passage, lines 90–98, in Old English with interlinear glosses. One may compare these lines with Cædmon's *Hymn* ([p. 31](#)) on the same theme. See the headnote there for the pronunciation of Old English characters.

Sægde se þe cupe
Said he who knew [how]

frumſceaft **f**ira **f**eorran reccan,
[the] origin [of] men from far [time] [to] recount,

cwæð þæt se **Æ**lmihtiga **e**orðan worhte,
said that the Almighty [the] earth wrought

wite-beorhtne **w**ang, swa **w**æter bebugeð,
beauty-bright plain as water surrounds [it]

gesette **s**ige-hrepig **s**unnan ond monan,
set triumph-glorious sun and moon

leoman to **l**eohte **l**andbuendum,
beacons as light [for] land-dwellers

ond ge**f**rætwaðe **f**oldan sceatas
and adorned [of] earth [the] grounds

leomum ond **l**eafulm, **l**if eac gesceop
[with] limbs and leaves, life also [he] created

cynna gehwylcum^{*} þara ðe **c**wice hwyrfaþ.
[of] kinds [for] each [of] those who living move about

A NOTE ON NAMES

Old English, like Modern German, contained many compound words, most of which have been lost in Modern English. Most of the names in *Beowulf* are compounds. Hrothgar is a combination of words meaning "glory" and "spear"; the name of his older brother, Heorogar, comes from "army" and "spear"; Hrothgar's sons Hrethric and Hrothmund contain the first elements of their father's name combined, respectively, with *ric* (kingdom, empire; Modern German *Reich*) and *mund* (hand, protection). As in the case of the Danish dynasty, family names often alliterate. Masculine names of the warrior class have military associations. The importance of family and the demands of alliteration frequently lead to the designation of characters by formulas identifying them in terms of relationships. Thus Beowulf is referred to as "son of Ecgtheow" or "kinsman of Hygelac" (his uncle and lord).

The Old English spellings of names are mostly preserved in the translation. A few rules of pronunciation are worth keeping in mind. Initial *H* before *r* was sounded, and so Hrothgar's name alliterates

with that of his brother Heorogar. The combination *cg* has the value of *dg* in words like “edge.” The first element in the name of Beowulf’s father “Ecgtheow” is the same word as “edge,” and, by the figure of speech called synecdoche (a part of something stands for the whole), *ecg* stands for *sword* and Ecgtheow means “sword-servant.”

Endnotes

- Note *: Modern syntax would be “for each of kinds.” In Old English, the endings *-a* and *-um* indicate that *gewylcum* is an indirect object and *cynna*, a possessive plural. [Return to reference *](#)

Beowulf *

[PROLOGUE: THE RISE OF THE DANISH NATION]

So. The Spear-Danes¹ in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and
greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.
There was Shield Sheafson,² scourge of many
tribes,
5 a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
10 and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.
Afterward a boy-child was born to Shield,
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent
by God to that nation. He knew what they had
tholed,³
15 the long times and troubles they'd come through
without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that,
20 giving freely while his father lives
so that afterward in age when fighting starts
steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behavior that's admired
is the path to power among people everywhere.

25 Shield was still thriving when his time came
and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
30 they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
the chief they revered who had long ruled them.
A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbor,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
35 laid out by the mast, amidships,
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
with battle-tackle, bladed weapons
40 and coats of mail. The massed treasure
was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
on out into the ocean's sway.
They decked his body no less bountifully
with offerings than those first ones did
who cast him away when he was a child
45 and launched him alone out over the waves.⁴
And they set a gold standard up
high above his head and let him drift
to wind and tide, bewailing him
and mourning their loss. No man can tell,
50 no wise man in hall or weathered veteran
knows for certain who salvaged that load.
Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.
He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
for a long time after his father took leave
55 of his life on earth. And then his heir,
the great Halfdane,⁵ held sway
for as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
He was four times a father, this fighter prince:
60 one by one they entered the world,

Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga,
 and a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's
 queen,
 a balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.
 The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.
 Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
 65 young followers, a force that grew
 to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
 to hall-building: he handed down orders
 for men to work on a great mead-hall
 meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
 70 it would be his throne-room and there he would
 dispense
 his God-given goods to young and old—
 but not the common land or people's lives.⁶
 Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
 orders for work to adorn that wallstead
 75 were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there
 finished and ready, in full view,
 the hall of halls. Heorot was the name⁷
 he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
 Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
 80 and torques at the table. The hall towered,
 its gables wide and high and awaiting
 a barbarous burning.⁸ That doom abided,
 but in time it would come: the killer instinct
 85 unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.⁹

Endnotes

- Note *: The translation is by Seamus Heaney. [Return to reference *](#)
- Note 1: There are different compound names for tribes, often determined by alliteration in Old English poetry. Line 1 reads, "*Hwæt, we Gar-dena in gear-dagum,*" where alliteration falls on

Gar (spear) and *gear* (year). Old English hard and soft *g* (spelled *y* in Modern English) alliterate. The compound *geardagum* derives from “year,” used in the special sense of “long ago,” and “days” and survives in the archaic expression “days of yore.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Shield is the name of the founder of the Danish royal line. Sheafson translates *Scefing*, that is, *sheaf*+ the patronymic suffix *-ing*. Because Sheaf was a “foundling” (line 7: *feasceaft funden*, that is, found destitute) who arrived by sea (lines 45–46), it is likely that as a child Shield brought with him only a sheaf, a symbol of fruitfulness.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Suffered, endured.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See n. 2, above. Since Shield was found destitute, “no less bountifully” is litotes or understatement: the ironic reminder that he came with nothing (line 43) emphasizes the reversal of his fortunes.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Probably named so because, according to one source, his mother was a Swedish princess.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The king could not dispose of land used by all, such as a common pasture, or of slaves.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, “Hart,” from antlers fastened to the gables, or because the crossed gable-ends resembled a stag’s antlers; the hart was also an icon of royalty.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An allusion to the future destruction of Heorot by fire, probably in a raid by the Heatho-Bards.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: As told later (lines 2020–69), Hrothgar plans to marry a daughter to Ingeld, chief of the Heatho-Bards, in hopes of resolving a long-standing feud. See previous note.[Return to reference 9](#)

[HEOROT IS ATTACKED]

Then a powerful demon,¹ a prowler through the
dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
to hear the din of the loud banquet
every day in the hall, the harp being struck
and the clear song of a skilled poet
90 telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
how the Almighty had made the earth
a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
in His splendor He set the sun and the moon
to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
95 and filled the broad lap of the world
with branches and leaves; and quickened life
in every other thing that moved.
So times were pleasant for the people there
until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
100 began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
105 Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts.² For the killing of Abel
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
110 and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward.
So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
115 for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes

were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the
best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
120 the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses.
125 Then as dawn brightened and the day broke,
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
130 humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later merciless Grendel
135 struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
shifting himself to a safer distance
to bed in the bothies³ for who could be blind
140 to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of the hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.
So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
one against all, until the greatest house
145 in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
the lord of the Shieldings⁴ suffered under
his load of sorrow; and so, before long,
the news was known over the whole world.
150

Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
his long and unrelenting feud,
nothing but war; how he would never
parley or make peace with any Dane
155 nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.⁵
No counselor could ever expect
fair reparation from those rabid hands.
All were endangered; young and old
were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
160 who lurked and swooped in the long nights
on the misty moors; nobody knows
where these reavers from hell roam on their errands.
So Grendel waged his lonely war,
inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
165 atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
haunted the glittering hall after dark,
but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's
outcast.
These were hard times, heartbreaking
170 for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,
the highest in the land, would lend advice,
plotting how best the bold defenders
might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
175 offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls⁶ might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
180 of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul

in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The poet withholds the name for several lines. He does the same with the name of the hero as well as others.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See Genesis 4:9–12.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Huts, outlying buildings. Evidently Grendel wants only to dominate the hall.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The descendants of Shield, another name for the Danes.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, *wergild* (man-price); monetary compensation for the life of the slain man is the only way, according to Germanic law, to settle a feud peacefully.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, the devil. Heathen gods were thought to be devils.[Return to reference 6](#)

[THE HERO COMES TO HEOROT]

So that troubled time continued, woe
that never stopped, steady affliction
190 for Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
raids in the night, riven by the terror.
When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
was on home ground, over in Geatland.
195 There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
highborn and powerful. He ordered a boat
that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
to sail the swan's road and seek out that king,
200 the famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
his ambition to go, whilst he moved about
205 like the leader he was, enlisting men,
the best he could find; with fourteen others
the warrior boarded the boat as captain,
a canny pilot along coast and currents.
Time went by, the boat was on water,
210 in close under the cliffs.
Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
215 away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
Over the waves, with the wind behind her
and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
until her curved prow had covered the distance,
and on the following day, at the due hour,

220 those seafarers sighted land,
sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
225 over the side, out on to the sand,
and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
and a thresh of gear. They thanked God
for that easy crossing on a calm sea.
When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings'
lookout
230 whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
saw shields glittering on the gangplank
and battle-equipment being unloaded
he had to find out who and what
the arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
235 this horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
in formal terms, flourishing his spear:
"What kind of men are you who arrive
rigged out for combat in your coats of mail,
sailing here over the sea-lanes
240 in your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed
as lookout on this coast for a long time.
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
any danger to the Danish shore.
Never before has a force under arms
245 disembarked so openly—not bothering to ask
if the sentries allowed them safe passage
or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
a mightier man-at-arms on this earth
than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
250 he is truly noble. This is no mere
hanger-on in a hero's armor.
So now, before you fare inland
as interlopers, I have to be informed
about who you are and where you hail from.
Outsiders from across the water,

255 I say it again: the sooner you tell
where you come from and why, the better.”
The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
the distinguished one delivered this answer:
260 “We belong by birth to the Geat people
and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
In his day, my father was a famous man,
a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.
He outlasted many a long winter
and went on his way. All over the world
265 men wise in counsel continue to remember him.
We come in good faith to find your lord
and nation’s shield, the son of Halfdane.
Give us the right advice and direction.
We have arrived here on a great errand
270 to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
there should be nothing hidden or withheld between
us.
So tell us if what we have heard is true
about this threat, whatever it is,
this danger abroad in the dark nights,
275 this corpse-maker mongering death
in the Shieldings’ country. I come to proffer
my wholehearted help and counsel.
I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
to defeat his enemy and find respite—
280 if any respite is to reach him, ever.
I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
Otherwise, he must endure woes
and live with grief for as long as his hall
stands at the horizon on its high ground.”
285 Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,
the coast-guard answered: “Anyone with gumption
and a sharp mind will take the measure
of two things: what’s said and what’s done.

290 I believe what you have told me, that you are a
troop
loyal to our king. So come ahead
with your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
What's more, I'll order my own comrades
on their word of honor to watch your boat
295 down there on the strand—keep her safe
in her fresh tar, until the time comes
for her curved prow to preen on the waves
and bear this hero back to Geatland.
May one so valiant and venturesome
come unharmed through the clash of battle.”
300 So they went on their way. The ship rode the water,
broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
and anchored fast. Boar-shapes⁷ flashed
above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged
work of goldsmiths, watching over
305 those stern-faced men. They marched in step,
hurrying on till the timbered hall
rose before them, radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
building like it. Majesty lodged there,
310 its light shone over many lands.
So their gallant escort guided them
to that dazzling stronghold and indicated
the shortest way to it; then the noble warrior
wheeled on his horse and spoke these words:
315 “It is time for me to go. May the Almighty
Father keep you and in His kindness
watch over your exploits. I'm away to the sea,
back on alert against enemy raiders.”
It was a paved track, a path that kept them
320 in marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,
hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron
of their armor rang. So they duly arrived

in their grim war-graith⁸ and gear at the hall,
and, weary from the sea, stacked wide shields
325 of the toughest hardwood against the wall,
then collapsed on the benches; battle-dress
and weapons clashed. They collected their spears
in a seafarers' stook, a stand of grayish
tapering ash. And the troops themselves
330 were as good as their weapons.

Then a proud warrior
questioned the men concerning their origins:
"Where do you come from, carrying these
decorated shields and shirts of mail,
these cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?
335 I am Hrothgar's herald and officer.
I have never seen so impressive or large
an assembly of strangers. Stoutness of heart,
bravery not banishment, must have brought you to
Hrothgar."

The man whose name was known for courage,
340 the Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,
answered in return: "We are retainers
from Hygelac's band. Beowulf is my name.
If your lord and master, the most renowned
son of Halfdane, will hear me out
345 and graciously allow me to greet him in person,
I am ready and willing to report my errand."
Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief
renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom
and the temper of his mind: "I will take this
350 message,
in accordance with your wish, to our noble king,
our dear lord, friend of the Danes,
the giver of rings. I will go and ask him
about your coming here, then hurry back
with whatever reply it pleases him to give."
355

With that he turned to where Hrothgar sat,
an old man among retainers;
the valiant follower stood foursquare
in front of his king: he knew the courtesies.
Wulfgar addressed his dear lord:
360 "People from Geatland have put ashore.
They have sailed far over the wide sea.
They call the chief in charge of their band
by the name of Beowulf. They beg, my lord,
365 an audience with you, exchange of words
and formal greeting. Most gracious Hrothgar,
do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.
From their arms and appointment, they appear well
born
and worthy of respect, especially the one
who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed."
370 Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:
"I used to know him when he was a young boy.
His father before him was called Ecgtheow.
Hrethel the Geat⁹ gave Ecgtheow
his daughter in marriage. This man is their son,
375 here to follow up an old friendship.
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
with a gift-cargo across to Geatland
returned with marvelous tales about him:
380 athane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
in the grip of each hand. Now Holy God
has, in His goodness, guided him here
to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure.
385 Go immediately, bid him and the Geats
he has in attendance to assemble and enter.
Say, moreover, when you speak to them,
they are welcome to Denmark."

At the door of the

hall,

Wulfgar duly delivered the message:

390

"My lord, the conquering king of the Danes,
bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;
also that he welcomes you here to Heorot
and salutes your arrival from across the sea.

395

You are free now to move forward
to meet Hrothgar in helmets and armor,
but shields must stay here and spears be stacked
until the outcome of the audience is clear."

400

The hero arose, surrounded closely
by his powerful thanes. A party remained
under orders to keep watch on the arms;
the rest proceeded, led by their prince
under Heorot's roof. And standing on the hearth
in webbed links that the smith had woven,
the fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail-shirt,
405 resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:

410

"Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac's kinsman,
one of his hall-troop. When I was younger,
I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,
hard to ignore, reached me at home:
sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer
in this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,
empty and useless once the evening light
hides itself under heaven's dome.

415

So every elder and experienced councilman
among my people supported my resolve
to come here to you, King Hrothgar,
because all knew of my awesome strength.

420

They had seen me boltered¹ in the blood of enemies
when I battled and bound five beasts,
raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea
slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes

and avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it
upon themselves; I devastated them).
425 Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
settle the outcome in single combat.
And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people
and their ring of defense, my one request
430 is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far,
the privilege of purifying Heorot,
with my own men to help me, and nobody else.
I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
in his reckless way to use weapons;
435 therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame
and gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
is how it will be, a life-and-death
440 fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells
must deem it a just judgment by God.
If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;
he will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,
swoop without fear on that flower of manhood
445 as on others before. Then my face won't be there
to be covered in death: he will carry me away
as he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;
he will run gloating with my raw corpse
and feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy
fouling his moor-nest. No need then
450 to lament for long or lay out my body:²
if the battle takes me, send back
this breast-webbing that Weland³ fashioned
and Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.
Fate goes ever as fate must."
455 Hrothgar, the helmet of Shieldings, spoke:
"Beowulf, my friend, you have traveled here

to favor us with help and to fight for us.
There was a feud one time, begun by your father.
With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf
460 who was a Wulfing; so war was looming
and his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.
He came away then over rolling waves
to the South-Danes here, the sons of honor.
I was then in the first flush of kingship,
465 establishing my sway over the rich strongholds
of this heroic land. Heorogar,
my older brother and the better man,
also a son of Halfdane's, had died.
Finally I healed the feud by paying:
470 I shipped a treasure-trove to the Wulfings,
and Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of
allegiance.

"It bothers me to have to burden anyone
with all the grief that Grendel has caused
and the havoc he has wreaked upon us in Heorot,
475 our humiliations. My household guard
are on the wane, fate sweeps them away
into Grendel's clutches—but God can easily
halt these raids and harrowing attacks!

"Time and again, when the goblets passed
480 and seasoned fighters got flushed with beer
they would pledge themselves to protect Heorot
and wait for Grendel with their whetted swords.
But when dawn broke and day crept in
over each empty, blood-spattered bench,
485 the floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted
would be slick with slaughter. And so they died,
faithful retainers, and my following dwindled.
Now take your place at the table, relish
the triumph of heroes to your heart's content."

490

Endnotes

- Note 7: Carved images of boars were placed on helmets, probably as charms to protect the warriors.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Graith": archaic for apparel.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Clotted, sticky.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, for burial. Hrothgar will not need to give Beowulf an expensive funeral.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Famed blacksmith in Germanic legend.[Return to reference 3](#)

[FEAST AT HEOROT]

Then a bench was cleared in that banquet hall
so the Geats could have room to be together
and the party sat, proud in their bearing,
strong and stalwart. An attendant stood by
495 with a decorated pitcher, pouring bright
helpings of mead. And the minstrel sang,
filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice,
gladdening that great rally of Geats and Danes.
From where he crouched at the king's feet,
500 Unferth, a son of Ecglaf's, spoke
contrary words. Beowulf's coming,
his sea-braving, made him sick with envy:
he could not brook or abide the fact
that anyone else alive under heaven
might enjoy greater regard than he did:
505 "Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
in a swimming match on the open sea,
risking the water just to prove that you could win?
It was sheer vanity made you venture out
on the main deep. And no matter who tried,
510 friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,
neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed
you.
You waded in, embracing water,
taking its measure, mastering currents,
riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,
515 winter went wild in the waves, but you vied
for seven nights; and then he outswam you,
came ashore the stronger contender.
He was cast up safe and sound one morning
among the Heatho-Reams, then made his way
520 to where he belonged in Branding country,

home again, sure of his ground
in strongroom and bawn.⁴ So Breca made good
his boast upon you and was proved right.
No matter, therefore, how you may have fared
525 in every bout and battle until now,
this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever
outlasted an entire night against Grendel."
Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:
530 "Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say
about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
that was doing the talking. The truth is this:
when the going was heavy in those high waves,
I was the strongest swimmer of all.
We'd been children together and we grew up
535 daring ourselves to outdo each other,
boasting and urging each other to risk
our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.
Each of us swam holding a sword,
a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection
540 against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never
move out farther or faster from me
than I could manage to move from him.
Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
for five nights, until the long flow
545 and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
night falling and winds from the north
drove us apart. The deep boiled up
and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.
My armor helped me to hold out;
550 my hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,
a fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,
kept me safe when some ocean creature
pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
and swathed in its grip, I was granted one
555 final chance: my sword plunged

and the ordeal was over. Through my own hands,
the fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

560 "Time and again, foul things attacked me,
lurking and stalking, but I lashed out,
gave as good as I got with my sword.
My flesh was not for feasting on,
there would be no monsters gnawing and gloating
over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.
565 Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping
the sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated
like the ocean's leavings. From now on
sailors would be safe, the deep-sea raids
were over for good. Light came from the east,
bright guarantee of God, and the waves
570 went quiet; I could see headlands
and buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,
fate spares the man it has not already marked.
However it occurred, my sword had killed
nine sea-monsters. Such night dangers
575 and hard ordeals I have never heard of
nor of a man more desolate in surging waves.
But worn out as I was, I survived,
came through with my life. The ocean lifted
and laid me ashore, I landed safe
580 on the coast of Finland.

Now I cannot recall
any fight you entered, Unferth,
that bears comparison. I don't boast when I say
that neither you nor Breca were ever much
celebrated for swordsmanship
585 or for facing danger on the field of battle.
You killed your own kith and kin,
so for all your cleverness and quick tongue,
you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell.
The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly
590 as keen or courageous as you claim to be

Grendel would never have got away with
such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,
havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.
But he knows he need never be in dread
595 of your blade making a mizzle of his blood
or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter—
from the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the
spear.
He knows he can trample down you Danes
to his heart's content, humiliate and murder
600 without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.
I will show him how Geats shape to kill
in the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to
may go bravely to mead, when the morning light,
scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
605 and brings another daybreak to the world."
Then the gray-haired treasure-giver was glad;
far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
on the warrior's steadfastness and his word.
610 So the laughter started, the din got louder
and the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
the men in the hall, then handed the cup
615 first to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,
urging him to drink deep and enjoy it
because he was dear to them. And he drank it down
like the warlord he was, with festive cheer.
So the Helming woman went on her rounds,
620 queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,
offering the goblet to all ranks,
treating the household and the assembled troop,
until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.
With measured words she welcomed the Geat
625 and thanked God for granting her wish

that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive
to ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,
a daunting man, dangerous in action
and eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow;
630 Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:
"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
635 what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
prove myself with a proud deed
or meet my death here in the mead-hall."
This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat
pleased the lady well and she went to sit
640 by Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.
Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,
proud talk and the people happy,
loud and excited; until soon enough
Halfdane's heir had to be away
645 to his night's rest. He realized
that the demon was going to descend on the hall,
that he had plotted all day, from dawn light
until darkness gathered again over the world
and stealthy night-shapes came stealing forth
650 under the cloud-murk. The company stood
as the two leaders took leave of each other:
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,
named him hall-warden and announced as follows:
"Never, since my hand could hold a shield
655 have I entrusted or given control
of the Danes' hall to anyone but you.
Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.
Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,
beware of the enemy. There's nothing you wish for
660 that won't be yours if you win through alive."

Endnotes

- Note 4: Fortified outwork of a court or castle. The word was used by English planters in Ulster to describe fortified dwellings they erected on lands confiscated from the Irish [*Translator's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)

[THE FIGHT WITH GRENDEL]

Hrothgar departed then with his house-guard.
The lord of the Shieldings, their shelter in war,
left the mead-hall to lie with Wealhtheow,
his queen and bedmate. The King of Glory
665 (as people learned) had posted a lookout
who was a match for Grendel, a guard against
monsters,
special protection to the Danish prince.
And the Geat placed complete trust
in his strength of limb and the Lord's favor.
670 He began to remove his iron breast-mail,
took off the helmet and handed his attendant
the patterned sword, a smith's masterpiece,
ordering him to keep the equipment guarded.
And before he bedded down, Beowulf,
675 that prince of goodness, proudly asserted:
"When it comes to fighting, I count myself
as dangerous any day as Grendel.
So it won't be a cutting edge I'll wield
to mow him down, easily as I might.
680 He has no idea of the arts of war,
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me
if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord
685 in His wisdom grant the glory of victory
to whichever side He sees fit."
Then down the brave man lay with his bolster
under his head and his whole company
of sea-rovers at rest beside him.
690 None of them expected he would ever see
his homeland again or get back

to his native place and the people who reared him.
They knew too well the way it was before,
how often the Danes had fallen prey
695 to death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving
a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats.
Through the strength of one they all prevailed;
they would crush their enemy and come through
in triumph and gladness. The truth is clear:
700 Almighty God rules over mankind
and always has.

Then out of the night
came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift.
The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,
all except one; it was widely understood
705 that as long as God disallowed it,
the fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.
One man, however, was in fighting mood,
awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

In off the moors, down through the mist-bands
710 God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.
Under the cloud-murk he moved toward it
until it shone above him, a sheer keep
715 of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time
he had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling—
although never in his life, before or since,
did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.
Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
720 and arrived at the bawn.⁵ The iron-braced door
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
pacing the length of the patterned floor
725 with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,

flame more than light, flared from his eyes.
He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,
a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors
quartered together. And his glee was demonic,
730 picturing the mayhem: before morning
he would rip life from limb and devour them,
feed on their flesh; but his fate that night
was due to change, his days of ravening
had come to an end.

735 Mighty and canny,
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
for the first move the monster would make.
Nor did the creature keep him waiting
but struck suddenly and started in;
740 he grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
utterly lifeless, eaten up
hand and foot. Venturing closer,
745 his talon was raised to attack Beowulf
where he lay on the bed, he was bearing in
with open claw when the alert hero's
comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.
The captain of evil discovered himself
750 in a handgrip harder than anything
he had ever encountered in any man
on the face of the earth. Every bone in his body
quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape.
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide
755 with the devil's litter, for in all his days
he had never been clamped or cornered like this.
Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled
his bedtime speech, sprang to his feet
and got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,
760 the monster back-tracking, the man overpowering.
The dread of the land was desperate to escape,

to take a roundabout road and flee
to his lair in the fens. The latching power
in his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip
the terror-monger had taken to Heorot.
765 And now the timbers trembled and sang,
a hall-session⁶ that harrowed every Dane
inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,
the two contenders crashed through the building.
The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow
770 survived the onslaught and kept standing:
it was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame
braced with the best of blacksmith's work
inside and out. The story goes
that as the pair struggled, mead-benches were
775 smashed
and sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.
Before then, no Shielding elder would believe
there was any power or person upon earth
capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall
unless the burning embrace of a fire
780 engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary
wail arose, and bewildering fear
came over the Danes. Everyone felt it
who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,
a God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,
785 the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,
manacled tight by the man who of all men
was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.
But the earl-troop's leader was not inclined
790 to allow his caller to depart alive:
he did not consider that life of much account
to anyone anywhere. Time and again,
Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
their lord's life, laying about them
795

as best they could, with their ancestral blades.
Stalwart in action, they kept striking out
on every side, seeking to cut
straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle
there was something they could not have known at
800 the time,
that no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
could ever damage their demon opponent.
He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge
of every weapon.⁷ But his going away
out of this world and the days of his life
805 would be agony to him, and his alien spirit
would travel far into fiends' keeping.
Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men
with pain and affliction in former times
and had given offense also to God
810 found that his bodily powers failed him.
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly
locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived,
he was hateful to the other. The monster's whole
body was in pain; a tremendous wound
815 appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
the glory of winning; Grendel was driven
under the fen-banks, fatally hurt,
to his desolate lair. His days were numbered,
820 the end of his life was coming over him,
he knew it for certain; and one bloody clash
had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.
The man who had lately landed among them,
proud and sure, had purged the hall,
825 kept it from harm; he was happy with his nightwork
and the courage he had shown. The Geat captain
had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:
he had healed and relieved a huge distress,

830 unremitting humiliations,
the hard fate they'd been forced to undergo,
no small affliction. Clear proof of this
could be seen in the hand the hero displayed
high up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's
835 shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Endnotes

- Note 5: See p. 53, n. 4. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In Hiberno-English the word "session" (*seisiún* in Irish) can mean a gathering where musicians and singers perform for their own enjoyment [*Translator's note*]. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Grendel is protected by a charm against metals. [Return to reference 7](#)

[CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

Then morning came and many a warrior
gathered, as I've heard, around the gift-hall,
clan-chiefs flocking from far and near
down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly
at the monster's footprints. His fatal departure
840 was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,
the ignominious marks of his flight
where he'd skulked away, exhausted in spirit
and beaten in battle, bloodying the path,
hauling his doom to the demons' mere.⁸
845 The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,
there were loathsome upthrows and overturnings
of waves and gore and wound-slurry.
With his death upon him, he had dived deep
into his marsh-den, drowned out his life
850 and his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.
Then away they rode, the old retainers
with many a young man following after,
a troop on horseback, in high spirits
on their bay steeds. Beowulf's doings
855 were praised over and over again.
Nowhere, they said, north or south
between the two seas or under the tall sky
on the broad earth was there anyone better
to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom.
860 Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,
the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.
At times the war-band broke into a gallop,
letting their chestnut horses race
wherever they found the going good
865 on those well-known tracks. Meanwhile, a thane
of the king's household, a carrier of tales,

a traditional singer deeply schooled
in the lore of the past, linked a new theme
to a strict meter.⁹ The man started
870 to recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's
triumphs and feats in well-fashioned lines,
entwining his words.

He told what he'd heard
repeated in songs about Sigemund's exploits,¹
all of those many feats and marvels,
875 the struggles and wanderings of Waels's son,²
things unknown to anyone
except to Fitela, feuds and foul doings
confided by uncle to nephew when he felt
the urge to speak of them: always they had been
880 partners in the fight, friends in need.
They killed giants, their conquering swords
had brought them down.

After his death
Sigemund's glory grew and grew
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
885 *the guardian of the hoard. Under gray stone*
he had dared to enter all by himself
to face the worst without Fitela.
But it came to pass that his sword plunged
right through those radiant scales
890 *and drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.*
His daring had given him total possession
of the treasure-hoard, his to dispose of
however he liked. He loaded a boat:
Waels's son weighted her hold
895 *with dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted.*
Sigemund's name was known everywhere.
He was utterly valiant and venturesome,
a fence round his fighters and flourished therefore
900 *after King Heremod's³ prowess declined*

and his campaigns slowed down. The king was
 betrayed,
 ambushed in Jutland, overpowered
 and done away with. The waves of his grief
 had beaten him down, made him a burden,
 a source of anxiety to his own nobles:
 905 that expedition was often condemned
 in those earlier times by experienced men,
 men who relied on his lordship for redress,
 who presumed that the part of a prince was to
 thrive
 on his father's throne and defend the nation,
 910 the Shielding land where they lived and belonged,
 its holdings and strongholds. Such was Beowulf
 in the affection of his friends and of everyone
 alive.
 But evil entered into Heremod.
 They kept racing each other, urging their mounts
 915 down sandy lanes. The light of day
 broke and kept brightening. Bands of retainers
 galloped in excitement to the gabled hall
 to see the marvel; and the king himself,
 guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person,
 920 walked in majesty from the women's quarters
 with a numerous train, attended by his queen
 and her crowd of maidens, across to the mead-hall.
 When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,
 standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,
 925 gazing toward the roofwork and Grendel's talon:
 "First and foremost, let the Almighty Father
 be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long
 harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd
 can work His wonders always and everywhere.
 930 Not long since, it seemed I would never
 be granted the slightest solace or relief
 from any of my burdens: the best of houses

glittered and reeked and ran with blood.
This one worry outweighed all others—
935 a constant distress to counselors entrusted
with defending the people's forts from assault
by monsters and demons. But now a man,
with the Lord's assistance, has accomplished
something
none of us could manage before now
940 for all our efforts. Whoever she was
who brought forth this flower of manhood,
if she is still alive, that woman can say
that in her labor the Lord of Ages
bestowed a grace on her. So now, Beowulf,
945 I adopt you in my heart as a dear son.
Nourish and maintain this new connection,
you noblest of men; there'll be nothing you'll want
for,
no worldly goods that won't be yours.
I have often honored smaller achievements,
950 recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,
lavished rewards on the less deserving.
But you have made yourself immortal
by your glorious action. May the God of Ages
continue to keep and requite you well."
955 Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"We have gone through with a glorious endeavor
and been much favored in this fight we dared
against the unknown. Nevertheless,
960 if you could have seen the monster himself
where he lay beaten, I would have been better
pleased.
My plan was to pounce, pin him down
in a tight grip and grapple him to death—
have him panting for life, powerless and clasped
in my bare hands, his body in thrall.
965 But I couldn't stop him from slipping my hold.

The Lord allowed it, my lock on him
wasn't strong enough; he struggled fiercely
and broke and ran. Yet he bought his freedom
at a high price, for he left his hand
970 and arm and shoulder to show he had been here,
a cold comfort for having come among us.
And now he won't be long for this world.
He has done his worst but the wound will end him.
He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain,
975 limping and looped in it. Like a man outlawed
for wickedness, he must await
the mighty judgment of God in majesty."
There was less tampering and big talk then
from Unferth the boaster, less of his blather
980 as the hall-thanes eyed the awful proof
of the hero's prowess, the splayed hand
up under the eaves. Every nail,
claw-scale and spur, every spike
and welt on the hand of that heathen brute
985 was like barbed steel. Everybody said
there was no honed iron hard enough
to pierce him through, no time-proofed blade
that could cut his brutal, blood-caked claw.
Then the order was given for all hands
990 to help to refurbish Heorot immediately:
men and women thronging the wine-hall,
getting it ready. Gold thread shone
in the wall-hangings, woven scenes
that attracted and held the eye's attention.
995 But iron-braced as the inside of it had been,
that bright room lay in ruins now.
The very doors had been dragged from their hinges.
Only the roof remained unscathed
by the time the guilt-fouled fiend turned tail
1000 in despair of his life. But death is not easily
escaped from by anyone:

all of us with souls, earth-dwellers
and children of men, must make our way
to a destination already ordained
1005 where the body, after the banqueting,
sleeps on its deathbed.

Then the due time arrived
for Halfdane's son to proceed to the hall.
The king himself would sit down to feast.
No group ever gathered in greater numbers
1010 or better order around their ring-giver.
The benches filled with famous men
who fell to with relish; round upon round
of mead was passed; those powerful kinsmen,
Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits
1015 in the raftered hall. Inside Heorot
there was nothing but friendship. The Shielding
nation
was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.⁴
Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
with a gold standard as a victory gift,
1020 an embroidered banner; also breast-mail
and a helmet; and a sword carried high,
that was both precious object and token of honor.
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;
it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts
1025 in front of the hall-troops. There haven't been many
moments, I am sure, when men exchanged
four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.
An embossed ridge, a band lapped with wire
arched over the helmet: head-protection
1030 to keep the keen-ground cutting edge
from damaging it when danger threatened
and the man was battling behind his shield.
Next the king ordered eight horses
with gold bridles to be brought through the yard
1035

into the hall. The harness of one
included a saddle of sumptuous design,
the battle-seat where the son of Halfdane
rode when he wished to join the sword-play:
1040 wherever the killing and carnage were the worst,
he would be to the fore, fighting hard.
Then the Danish prince, descendant of Ing,
handed over both the arms and the horses,
urging Beowulf to use them well.
1045 And so their leader, the lord and guard
of coffer and strongroom, with customary grace
bestowed upon Beowulf both sets of gifts.
A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.
The chieftain went on to reward the others:
1050 each man on the bench who had sailed with Beowulf
and risked the voyage received a bounty,
some treasured possession. And compensation,
a price in gold, was settled for the Geat
Grendel had cruelly killed earlier—
1055 as he would have killed more, had not mindful God
and one man's daring prevented that doom.
Past and present, God's will prevails.
Hence, understanding is always best
and a prudent mind. Whoever remains
1060 for long here in this earthly life
will enjoy and endure more than enough.
They sang then and played to please the hero,
words and music for their warrior prince,
harp tunes and tales of adventure:
1065 there were high times on the hall benches,
and the king's poet performed his part
with the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding
the tale of the fierce attack in Friesland
where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death.⁵
Hildeburh
1070

had little cause
to credit the Jutes:
son and brother,
she lost them both
on the battlefield.
She, bereft
and blameless, they
foredoomed, cut down
and spear-gored. She,
the woman in shock,
1075 waylaid by grief,
Hoc's daughter—
how could she not
lament her fate
when morning came
and the light broke
on her murdered dears?
And so farewell
delight on earth,
war carried away
1080 Finn's troop of thanes
all but a few.
How then could Finn
hold the line
or fight on
to the end with Hengest,
how save
the rump of his force
from that enemy chief?
So a truce was offered
1085 as follows:⁶ first
separate quarters
to be cleared for the Danes,
hall and throne
to be shared with the Frisians.

Then, second:
 every day
at the dole-out of gifts
 Finn, son of Focwald,
should honor the Danes,
1090 bestow with an even
hand to Hengest
 and Hengest's men
the wrought-gold rings,
 bounty to match
the measure he gave
 his own Frisians—
to keep morale
 in the beer-hall high.
Both sides then
1095 sealed their agreement.
With oaths to Hengest
 Finn swore
openly, solemnly,
 that the battle survivors
would be guaranteed
 honor and status.
No infringement
 by word or deed,
no provocation
1100 would be permitted.
Their own ring-giver
 after all
was dead and gone,
 they were leaderless,
in forced allegiance
 to his murderer.
So if any Frisian
 stirred up bad blood
with insinuations
1105 or taunts about this,

*the blade of the sword
would arbitrate it.
A funeral pyre
was then prepared,
effulgent gold
brought out from the hoard.
The pride and prince
of the Shieldings lay
awaiting the flame.*

1110 *Everywhere
there were blood-plastered
coats of mail.
The pyre was heaped
with boar-shaped helmets
forged in gold,
with the gashed corpses
of wellborn Danes—
many had fallen.*

1115 *Then Hildeburh
ordered her own
son's body
be burnt with Hnaef's,
the flesh on his bones
to sputter and blaze
beside his uncle's.*

*The woman wailed
and sang keens,
the warrior went up.⁷*

1120 *Carcass flame
swirled and fumed,
they stood round the burial
mound and howled
as heads melted,
crusted gashes
spattered and ran*

bloody matter.

The glutton element
 flamed and consumed
the dead of both sides.

1125 *Their great days were gone.*
Warriors scattered
 to homes and forts
all over Friesland,
 fewer now, feeling
loss of friends.

Hengest stayed,
lived out that whole
 resentful, blood-sullen
winter with Finn,

1130 *homesick and helpless.*
No ring-whorled prow
 could up then
and away on the sea.
 Wind and water
raged with storms,
 wave and shingle
were shackled in ice
 until another year
appeared in the yard

1135 *as it does to this day,*
the seasons constant,
 the wonder of light
coming over us.

Then winter was gone,
earth's lap grew lovely,
 longing woke
in the cooped-up exile
 for a voyage home—
but more for vengeance,

1140 *some way of bringing*
things to a head:

*his sword arm hankered
to greet the Jutes.*

*So he did not balk
once Hunlafing*

*placed on his lap
Dazzle-the-Duel,*

*the best sword of all,⁸
whose edges Jutes
1145 knew only too well.*

*Thus blood was spilled,
the gallant Finn
slain in his home*

*after Guthlaf and Oslaf⁹
back from their voyage
made old accusation:
the brutal ambush,
the fate they had suffered,
all blamed on Finn.*

*1150 The wildness in them
had to brim over.*

*The hall ran red
with blood of enemies.*

*Finn was cut down,
the queen brought away*

*and everything
the Shieldings could find
inside Finn's walls—*

*the Frisian king's
1155 gold collars and gemstones—
swept off to the ship.*

*Over sea-lanes then
back to Daneland*

*the warrior troop
bore that lady home.*

The poem was over,
the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
started on the benches, stewards did the rounds
1160 with wine in splendid jugs, and Wealhtheow came to
sit
in her gold crown between two good men,
uncle and nephew, each one of whom
still trusted the other;¹ and the forthright Unferth,
1165 admired by all for his mind and courage
although under a cloud for killing his brothers,
reclined near the king.

The queen spoke:
"Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;
raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats
duly and gently, discourse with them,
1170 be open-handed, happy and fond.
Relish their company, but recollect as well
all of the boons that have been bestowed on you.
The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
and now the word is that you want to adopt
1175 this warrior as a son. So, while you may,
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.
He is noble and will use the young ones well.
1180 He will not let you down. Should you die before him,
he will treat our children truly and fairly.
He will honor, I am sure, our two sons,
repay them in kind, when he recollects
all the good things we gave him once,
1185 the favor and respect he found in his childhood."
She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,
Hrethric and Hrothmund, with other nobles' sons,
all the youth together; and that good man,
Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers.

1190 The cup was carried to him, kind words
spoken in welcome and a wealth of wrought gold
graciously bestowed: two arm bangles,
a mail-shirt and rings, and the most resplendent
1195 torque of gold I ever heard tell of
anywhere on earth or under heaven.
There was no hoard like it since Hama snatched
the Brosings' neck-chain and bore it away
with its gems and settings to his shining fort,
1200 away from Eormenric's wiles and hatred,²
and thereby ensured his eternal reward.
Hygelac the Geat, grandson of Swerting,
wore this neck-ring on his last raid;³
at bay under his banner, he defended the booty,
treasure he had won. Fate swept him away
1205 because of his proud need to provoke
a feud with the Frisians. He fell beneath his shield,
in the same gem-crusted, kingly gear
he had worn when he crossed the frothing wave-vat.
So the dead king fell into Frankish hands.
1210 They took his breast-mail, also his neck-torque,
and punier warriors plundered the slain
when the carnage ended; Geat corpses
covered the field.

Applause filled the hall.

1215 Then Wealhtheow pronounced in the presence of the
company:
"Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,
wear it for luck and wear also this mail
from our people's armory: may you prosper in them!
Be acclaimed for strength, for kindly guidance
to these two boys, and your bounty will be sure.
1220 You have won renown: you are known to all men
far and near, now and forever.
Your sway is wide as the wind's home,

as the sea around cliffs. And so, my prince,
 I wish you a lifetime's luck and blessings
 1225 to enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons
 with tender care, be strong and kind.
 Here each comrade is true to the other,
 loyal to lord, loving in spirit.
 1230 The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready:
 having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid."
 She moved then to her place. Men were drinking
 wine
 at that rare feast; how could they know fate,
 the grim shape of things to come,
 the threat looming over many thanes
 1235 as night approached and King Hrothgar prepared
 to retire to his quarters? Retainers in great numbers
 were posted on guard as so often in the past.
 Benches were pushed back, bedding gear and
 bolsters
 spread across the floor, and one man
 1240 lay down to his rest, already marked for death.
 At their heads they placed their polished timber
 battle-shields; and on the bench above them,
 each man's kit was kept to hand:
 1245 a towering war-helmet, webbed mail-shirt
 and great-shafted spear. It was their habit
 always and everywhere to be ready for action,
 at home or in the camp, in whatever case
 and at whatever time the need arose
 1250 to rally round their lord. They were a right people.

Endnotes

- Note 8: A lake or pool, although we learn later that it has an outlet to the sea. Grendel's habitat. [Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: That is, an extemporaneous heroic poem in alliterative verse about Beowulf's deeds.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Tales about Sigemund, his nephew Sinfjotli (Fitela), and his son Sigurth are found in a 13th-century Old Icelandic collection of legends known as the *Volsung Saga*. Analogous stories must have been known to the poet and his audience, though details differ.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Waels is the father of Sigemund.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Heremod was a bad king, held up by the bard as the opposite of Beowulf, as Sigemund is held up as a heroic prototype of Beowulf.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Probably an ironic allusion to the future usurpation of the throne from Hrothgar's sons by Hrothulf, although no such treachery is recorded of Hrothulf, who is the hero of other Germanic stories.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5:
The bard's lay is known as the Finnsburg Episode. Its allusive style makes the tale obscure in many details, although some can be filled in from a fragmentary Old English lay, which modern editors have titled *The Fight at Finnsburg*. Hildeburh, the daughter of the former Danish king Hoc, was married to Finn, king of Friesland, presumably to help end a feud between their peoples. As the episode opens, the feud has already broken out again when a visiting party of Danes, led by Hildeburh's brother Hnaef, who has succeeded their father, is attacked by a tribe called the Jutes. The Jutes are subject to Finn but may be a clan distinct from the Frisians, and Finn does not seem to have instigated the attack. In the ensuing battle, both Hnaef and the son of Hildeburh and Finn are killed, and both sides suffer heavy losses.
[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The truce was offered by Finn to Hengest, who succeeded Hnaef as leader of the Danes.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The meaning may be that the warrior was placed up on the pyre, or went up in smoke. "Keens": lamentations or dirges for the dead.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Hunlafing may be the son of a Danish warrior called Hunlaf. The placing of the sword in Hengest's lap is a symbolic call for revenge.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: It is not clear whether the Danes have traveled home and then returned to Friesland with reinforcements or whether the Danish survivors attack once the weather allows them to take ship.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: See p. 63, n. 4.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The necklace presented to Beowulf is compared to one worn by the goddess Freya in Germanic mythology. In another story it was stolen by Hama from the Gothic king Eormenric, who is treated as a tyrant in Germanic legend, but how Eormenric came to possess it is not known.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Later we learn that Beowulf gave the necklace to Hygd, the queen of his lord Hygelac. Hygelac is here said to have been wearing it on his last expedition. This is the first of several allusions to Hygelac's death on a raid up the Rhine, the one incident in the poem that can be connected to a historical event documented elsewhere.[Return to reference 3](#)

[ANOTHER ATTACK]

They went to sleep. And one paid dearly
for his night's ease, as had happened to them often,
ever since Grendel occupied the gold-hall,
committing evil until the end came,
death after his crimes. Then it became clear,
1255 obvious to everyone once the fight was over,
that an avenger lurked and was still alive,
grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,
monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
1260 She had been forced down into fearful waters,
the cold depths, after Cain had killed
his father's son, felled his own
brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw,
marked by having murdered, he moved into the
wilds,
shunned company and joy. And from Cain there
1265 sprang
misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,
the banished and accursed, due to come to grips
with that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle.
The monster wrenched and wrestled with him,
but Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,
1270 the wondrous gifts God had showered on him:
he relied for help on the Lord of All,
on His care and favor. So he overcame the foe,
brought down the hell-brute. Broken and bowed,
outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind
1275 made for his death-den. But now his mother
had sallied forth on a savage journey,
grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.
She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure

1280 a great reversal, once Grendel's mother
attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less
only by as much as an amazon warrior's
strength is less than an armed man's
when the hefted sword, its hammered edge
1285 and gleaming blade slathered in blood,
razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet.
Then in the hall, hard-honed swords
were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield
lifted and braced; there was little thought of helmets
1290 or woven mail when they woke in terror.
The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,
in mortal terror the moment she was found.
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers
in a tight hold, then headed for the fen.
1295 To Hrothgar, this man was the most beloved
of the friends he trusted between the two seas.
She had done away with a great warrior,
ambushed him at rest.

Beowulf was elsewhere.

1300 Earlier, after the award of the treasure,
the Geat had been given another lodging.
There was uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their
trophy,
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow
to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,
both parties having to pay
1305 with the lives of friends. And the old lord,
the gray-haired warrior, was heartsore and weary
when he heard the news: his highest-placed adviser,
his dearest companion, was dead and gone.
Beowulf was quickly brought to the chamber:
1310 the winner of fights, the arch-warrior,
came first-footing in with his fellow troops
to where the king in his wisdom waited,
still wondering whether Almighty God

would ever turn the tide of his misfortunes.
1315 So Beowulf entered with his band in attendance
and the wooden floorboards banged and rang
as he advanced, hurrying to address
the prince of the Ingwins, asking if he'd rested
since the urgent summons had come as a surprise.
1320 Then Hrothgar, the Shieldings' helmet, spoke:
"Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.
Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.
He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother
and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor,
1325 my right-hand man when the ranks clashed
and our boar-crests had to take a battering
in the line of action. Aeschere was everything
the world admires in a wise man and a friend.
Then this roaming killer came in a fury
1330 and slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,
glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,
I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud
because of last night, when you killed Grendel,
wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat
1335 since for too long he had terrorized us
with his depredations. He died in battle,
paid with his life; and now this powerful
other one arrives, this force for evil
driven to avenge her kinsman's death.
1340 Or so it seems to thanes in their grief,
in the anguish everythane endures
at the loss of a ring-giver, now that the hand
that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death.
1345 "I have heard it said by my people in hall,
counselors who live in the upland country,
that they have seen two such creatures
prowling the moors, huge marauders
from some other world. One of these things,
as far as anyone ever can discern,

1350 looks like a woman; the other, warped
in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale
bigger than any man, an unnatural birth
called Grendel by the country people
1355 in former days. They are fatherless creatures,
and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past
of demons and ghosts. They dwell apart
among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags
and treacherous keshes, where cold streams
1360 pour down the mountain and disappear
under mist and moorland.

A few miles from here
a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
above a mere; the overhanging bank
is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.
At night there, something uncanny happens:
1365 the water burns. And the mere bottom
has never been sounded by the sons of men.
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
the hart in flight from pursuing hounds
will turn to face them with firm-set horns
1370 and die in the wood rather than dive
beneath its surface. That is no good place.
When wind blows up and stormy weather
makes clouds scud and the skies weep,
out of its depths a dirty surge
1375 is pitched toward the heavens. Now help depends
again on you and on you alone.
The gap of danger where the demon waits
is still unknown to you. Seek it if you dare.
I will compensate you for settling the feud
1380 as I did the last time with lavish wealth,
coffers of coiled gold, if you come back."

[BEOWULF FIGHTS GRENDEL'S MOTHER]

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
1385 For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark.
1390 So arise, my lord, and let us immediately
set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.
I guarantee you: she will not get away,
not to dens under ground nor upland groves
nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.
1395 Endure your troubles today. Bear up
and be the man I expect you to be."
With that the old lord sprang to his feet
and praised God for Beowulf's pledge.
Then a bit and halter were brought for his horse
with the plaited mane. The wise king mounted
1400 the royal saddle and rode out in style
with a force of shield-bearers. The forest paths
were marked all over with the monster's tracks,
her trail on the ground wherever she had gone
1405 across the dark moors, dragging away
the body of that thane, Hrothgar's best
counselor and overseer of the country.
So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths
and ways where they were forced into single file,
1410 ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.
He went in front with a few men,
good judges of the lie of the land,
and suddenly discovered the dismal wood,

1415 mountain trees growing out at an angle
above gray stones: the bloodshot water
surged underneath. It was a sore blow
to all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
a hurt to each and every one
of that noble company when they came upon
1420 Aeschere's head at the foot of the cliff.
Everybody gazed as the hot gore
kept wallowing up and an urgent war-horn
repeated its notes: the whole party
sat down to watch. The water was infested
1425 with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-
dragons
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
serpents and wild things such as those that often
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road
and doom the voyage. Down they plunged,
1430 lashing in anger at the loud call
of the battle-bugle. An arrow from the bow
of the Geat chief got one of them
as he surged to the surface: the seasoned shaft
stuck deep in his flank and his freedom in the water
1435 got less and less. It was his last swim.
He was swiftly overwhelmed in the shallows,
prodded by barbed boar-spears,
cornered, beaten, pulled up on the bank,
a strange lake-birth, a loathsome catch
1440 men gazed at in awe.

Beowulf got ready,
donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;
his mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail
would soon meet with the menace underwater.
It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
1445 no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
no vicious armlock choke his life out.
To guard his head he had a glittering helmet

that was due to be muddied on the mere bottom
and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold,
1450 princely headgear hooped and hasped
by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders
in days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;
since then it had resisted every sword.
And another item lent by Unferth
1455 at that moment of need was of no small importance:
the brehon⁴ handed him a hilted weapon,
a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
1460 the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,
anyone who had fought and faced the worst
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time
it had been called to perform heroic feats.
When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
1465 Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
could hardly have remembered the ranting speech
he had made in his cups. He was not man enough
to face the turmoil of a fight under water
and the risk to his life. So there he lost
1470 fame and repute. It was different for the other
rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Wisest of kings, now that I have come
to the point of action, I ask you to recall
1475 what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane
and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall
and suffer death while serving your cause,
would act like a father to me afterward.
If this combat kills me, take care
1480 of my young company, my comrades in arms.
And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,
to send Hygelac the treasures I received.

Let the lord of the Geats gaze on that gold,
let Hrethel's son take note of it and see
1485 that I found a ring-giver of rare magnificence
and enjoyed the good of his generosity.
And Unferth is to have what I inherited:
to that far-famed man I bequeath my own
sharp-honed, wave-sheened wonder-blade.
1490 With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die."
After these words, the prince of the Weather-Geats
was impatient to be away and plunged suddenly:
without more ado, he dived into the heaving
depths of the lake. It was the best part of a day
1495 before he could see the solid bottom.
Quickly the one who haunted those waters,
who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds
for a hundred seasons, sensed a human
observing her outlandish lair from above.
1500 So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch
him
in her brutal grip; but his body, for all that,
remained unscathed: the mesh of the chain-mail
saved him on the outside. Her savage talons
failed to rip the web of his war-shirt.
1505 Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish
swimmer
carried the ring-mailed prince to her court
so that for all his courage he could never use
the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde
came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts
1510 who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail
in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man
could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole
and yet the water there did not work against him
because the hall-roofing held off
1515 the force of the current; then he saw firelight,
a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell,
the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength,
then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm:
1520 the decorated blade came down ringing
and singing on her head. But he soon found
his battle-torch extinguished; the shining blade
refused to bite. It spared her and failed
the man in his need. It had gone through many
1525 hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armor
and helmets of the doomed, but here at last
the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.
Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about
his name and fame: he never lost heart.
1530 Then, in a fury, he flung his sword away.
The keen, inlaid, worm-loop-patterned steel
was hurled to the ground: he would have to rely
on the might of his arm. So must a man do
who intends to gain enduring glory
1535 in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight
with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder
and laid about him in a battle frenzy:
he pitched his killer opponent to the floor
1540 but she rose quickly and retaliated,
grappled him tightly in her grim embrace.
The sure-footed fighter felt daunted,
the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.
So she pounced upon him and pulled out
1545 a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge
her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail
on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
turned the edge and tip of the blade.
The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
1550 and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
not helped to save him: holy God

decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
1555 once Beowulf got back up on his feet.
Then he saw a blade that boded well,
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,
one that any warrior would envy,
1560 but so huge and heavy of itself
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle.
So the Shieldings' hero hard-pressed and enraged,
took a firm hold of the hilt and swung
the blade in an arc, a resolute blow
1565 that bit deep into her neck-bone
and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was
elated.

1570 A light appeared and the place brightened
the way the sky does when heaven's candle
is shining clearly. He inspected the vault:
with sword held high, its hilt raised
to guard and threaten, Hygelac's thane
scouted by the wall in Grendel's wake.
1575 Now the weapon was to prove its worth.
The warrior determined to take revenge
for every gross act Grendel had committed—
and not only for that one occasion
when he'd come to slaughter the sleeping troops,
1580 fifteen of Hrothgar's house-guards
surprised on their benches and ruthlessly devoured,
and as many again carried away,
a brutal plunder. Beowulf in his fury
now settled that score: he saw the monster
1585 in his resting place, war-weary and wrecked,
a lifeless corpse, a casualty
of the battle in Heorot. The body gaped

at the stroke dealt to it after death:
 Beowulf cut the corpse's head off.
 1590 Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout
 with Hrothgar, watching the lake water,
 saw a heave-up and surge of waves
 and blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,
 spoke in their sage, experienced way
 1595 about the good warrior, how they never again
 expected to see that prince returning
 in triumph to their king. It was clear to many
 that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.
 The ninth hour of the day arrived.
 1600 The brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top
 and the king went home; but sick at heart,
 staring at the mere, the strangers held on.
 They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,
 Beowulf himself.
 Meanwhile, the sword
 1605 began to wilt into gory icicles
 to slather and thaw. It was a wonderful thing,
 the way it all melted as ice melts
 when the Father eases the fetters off the frost
 and unravels the water-ropes, He who wields power
 1610 over time and tide: He is the true Lord.
 The Geat captain saw treasure in abundance
 but carried no spoils from those quarters
 except for the head and the inlaid hilt
 embossed with jewels; its blade had melted
 1615 and the scrollwork on it burned, so scalding was the
 blood
 of the poisonous fiend who had perished there.
 Then away he swam, the one who had survived
 the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
 The wide water, the waves and pools,
 1620 were no longer infested once the wandering fiend
 let go of her life and this unreliable world.

The seafarers' leader made for land,
 resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
 the mighty load he was lugging to the surface.
 1625 His thanes advanced in a troop to meet him,
 thanking God and taking great delight
 in seeing their prince back safe and sound.
 Quickly the hero's helmet and mail-shirt
 were loosed and unlaced. The lake settled,
 1630 clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths.
 With high hearts they headed away
 along footpaths and trails through the fields,
 roads that they knew, each of them wrestling
 with the head they were carrying from the lakeside
 1635 cliff,
 men kingly in their courage and capable
 of difficult work. It was a task for four
 to hoist Grendel's head on a spear
 and bear it under strain to the bright hall.
 But soon enough they neared the place,
 1640 fourteen Geats in fine fettle,
 striding across the outlying ground
 in a delighted throng around their leader.
 In he came then, the thanes' commander,
 the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
 1645 his courage was proven, his glory was secure.
 Grendel's head was hauled by the hair,
 dragged across the floor where the people were
 drinking,
 a horror for both queen and company to behold.
 They stared in awe. It was an astonishing sight.
 1650

Endnotes

- Note 4: One of an ancient class of lawyers in Ireland
 [*Translator's note*]. The Old English word for Unferth's office,

thyle, has been interpreted as “orator” and “spokesman.”[Return to reference 4](#)

[ANOTHER CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"So, son of Halfdane, prince of the Shieldings,
we are glad to bring this booty from the lake.
It is a token of triumph and we tender it to you.
I barely survived the battle under water.
1655 It was hard-fought, a desperate affair
that could have gone badly; if God had not helped
me,
the outcome would have been quick and fatal.
Although Hrunting is hard-edged,
I could never bring it to bear in battle.
1660 But the Lord of Men allowed me to behold—
for He often helps the unbefriended—
an ancient sword shining on the wall,
a weapon made for giants, there for the wielding.
1665 Then my moment came in the combat and I struck
the dwellers in that den. Next thing the damascened
sword blade melted; it bloated and it burned
in their rushing blood. I have wrested the hilt
from the enemy's hand, avenged the evil
done to the Danes; it is what was due.
1670 And this I pledge, O prince of the Shieldings:
you can sleep secure with your company of troops
in Heorot Hall. Never need you fear
for a singlethane of your sept or nation,
young warriors or old, that laying waste of life
1675 that you and your people endured of yore."
Then the gold hilt was handed over
to the old lord, a relic from long ago
for the venerable ruler. That rare smithwork
was passed on to the prince of the Danes
1680 when those devils perished; once death removed

that murdering, guilt-steeped, God-cursed fiend,
eliminating his unholy life
and his mother's as well, it was willed to that king
who of all the lavish gift-lords of the north
1685 was the best regarded between the two seas.
Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
that relic of old times. It was engraved all over
and showed how war first came into the world
and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.
1690 They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;
the Almighty made the waters rise,
drowned them in the deluge for retribution.
In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards
1695 there were rune-markings correctly incised,
stating and recording for whom the sword
had been first made and ornamented
with its scrollworked hilt. Then everyone hushed
as the son of Halfdane spoke this wisdom:
1700 "A protector of his people, pledged to uphold
truth and justice and to respect tradition,
is entitled to affirm that this man
was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,
your fame has gone far and wide,
you are known everywhere. In all things you are
1705 even-tempered,
prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise
of friendship
we exchanged before. Forever you will be
your people's mainstay and your own warriors'
helping hand.

Heremod was different,
the way he behaved to Ecgwela's sons.
1710 His rise in the world brought little joy
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,
killed his own comrades, a pariah king

1715 who cut himself off from his own kind,
even though Almighty God had made him
eminent and powerful and marked him from the
start

for a happy life. But a change happened,
he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
to honor the Danes. He suffered in the end
1720 for having plagued his people for so long:
his life lost happiness.

So learn from this
and understand true values. I who tell you
have wintered into wisdom.

It is a great wonder
how Almighty God in His magnificence
1725 favors our race with rank and scope
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.
Sometimes He allows the mind of a man
of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
grants him fulfillment and felicity on earth
1730 and forts to command in his own country.
He permits him to lord it in many lands
until the man in his unthinkingness
forgets that it will ever end for him.

He indulges his desires; illness and old age
1735 mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled
by envy or malice or the thought of enemies
with their hate-honed swords. The whole world
conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst
until an element of overweening

1740 enters him and takes hold
while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowns,
grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,
an archer who draws a deadly bow.

And then the man is hit in the heart,
1745 the arrow flies beneath his defenses,
the devious promptings of the demon start.

His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
He covets and resents; dishonors custom
and bestows no gold; and because of good things
1750 that the Heavenly Powers gave him in the past
he ignores the shape of things to come.
Then finally the end arrives
when the body he was lent collapses and falls
prey to its death; ancestral possessions
1755 and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another
who lets them go with a liberal hand.

“O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
1760 For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low,
or a sudden fire or surge of water
or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
1765 or repellent age. Your piercing eye
will dim and darken; and death will arrive,
dear warrior, to sweep you away.

“Just so I ruled the Ring-Danes’ country
for fifty years, defended them in wartime
1770 with spear and sword against constant assaults
by many tribes: I came to believe
my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.
Still, what happened was a hard reversal
from bliss to grief. Grendel struck
1775 after lying in wait. He laid waste to the land
and from that moment my mind was in dread
of his depredations. So I praise God
in His heavenly glory that I lived to behold
this head dripping blood and that after such
1780 harrowing
I can look upon it in triumph at last.
Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure,

and move to the feast. Tomorrow morning
our treasure will be shared and showered upon you."

1785 The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed
the old man's bidding; he sat on the bench.
And soon all was restored, the same as before.
Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,
and a banquet set forth; black night fell
and covered them in darkness.

1790 Then the company

 rose
for the old campaigner: the gray-haired prince
was ready for bed. And a need for rest
came over the brave shield-bearing Geat.
He was a weary seafarer, far from home,
so immediately a house-guard guided him out,
1795 one whose office entailed looking after
whatever a thane on the road in those days
might need or require. It was noble courtesy.

[BEOWULF RETURNS HOME]

1800 That great heart rested. The hall towered,
gold-shingled and gabled, and the guest slept in it
until the black raven with raucous glee
announced heaven's joy, and a hurry of brightness
overran the shadows. Warriors rose quickly,
impatient to be off: their own country
1805 was beckoning the nobles; and the bold voyager
longed to be aboard his distant boat.

Then that stalwart fighter ordered Hrunting
to be brought to Unferth, and bade Unferth
take the sword and thanked him for lending it.
1810 He said he had found it a friend in battle
and a powerful help; he put no blame
on the blade's cutting edge. He was a considerate
man.

And there the warriors stood in their war-gear,
eager to go, while their honored lord
approached the platform where the other sat.
1815 The undaunted hero addressed Hrothgar.
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
"Now we who crossed the wide sea
have to inform you that we feel a desire
to return to Hygelac. Here we have been welcomed
1820 and thoroughly entertained. You have treated us
well.

If there is any favor on earth I can perform
beyond deeds of arms I have done already,
anything that would merit your affections more,
I shall act, my lord, with alacrity.
1825 If ever I hear from across the ocean
that people on your borders are threatening battle
as attackers have done from time to time,

1830 I shall land with a thousand thanes at my back
to help your cause. Hygelac may be young
to rule a nation, but this much I know
about the king of the Geats: he will come to my aid
and want to support me by word and action
in your hour of need, when honor dictates
that I raise a hedge of spears around you.
1835 Then if Hrethric should think about traveling
as a king's son to the court of the Geats,
he will find many friends. Foreign places
yield more to one who is himself worth meeting."
Hrothgar spoke and answered him:
1840 "The Lord in his wisdom sent you those words
and they came from the heart. I have never heard
so young a man make truer observations.
You are strong in body and mature in mind,
impressive in speech. If it should come to pass
1845 that Hrethel's descendant dies beneath a spear,
if deadly battle or the sword blade or disease
fells the prince who guards your people
and you are still alive, then I firmly believe
the seafaring Geats won't find a man
1850 worthier of acclaim as their king and defender
than you, if only you would undertake
the lordship of your homeland. My liking for you
deepens with time, dear Beowulf.
What you have done is to draw two peoples,
1855 the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes,
into shared peace and a pact of friendship
in spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past.
For as long as I rule this far-flung land
treasures will change hands and each side will treat
1860 the other with gifts; across the gannet's bath,
over the broad sea, whorled prows will bring
presents and tokens. I know your people
are beyond reproach in every respect,

steadfast in the old way with friend or foe.”
1865 Then the earls’ defender furnished the hero
with twelve treasures and told him to set out,
sail with those gifts safely home
to the people he loved, but to return promptly.
And so the good and gray-haired Dane,
1870 that highborn king, kissed Beowulf
and embraced his neck, then broke down
in sudden tears. Two forebodings
disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:
nevermore would they meet each other
1875 face to face. And such was his affection
that he could not help being overcome:
his fondness for the man was so deep-founded,
it warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings
tight in his breast.
1880 The embrace ended
and Beowulf, glorious in his gold regalia,
stepped the green earth. Straining at anchor
and ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.
So they went on their journey, and Hrothgar’s
generosity
was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king
1885 until old age sapped his strength and did him
mortal harm, as it has done so many.
Down to the waves then, dressed in the web
of their chain-mail and war-shirts the young men
marched
in high spirits. The coast-guard spied them,
1890 thanes setting forth, the same as before.
His salute this time from the top of the cliff
was far from unmannerly; he galloped to meet them
and as they took ship in their shining gear,
he said how welcome they would be in Geatland.
1895 Then the broad hull was beached on the sand
to be cargoes with treasure, horses and war-gear.

The curved prow motioned; the mast stood high
 above Hrothgar's riches in the loaded hold.
 1900 The guard who had watched the boat was given
 a sword with gold fittings, and in future days
 that present would make him a respected man
 at his place on the mead-bench.
 Then the keel
 plunged
 and shook in the sea; and they sailed from Denmark.
 1905 Right away the mast was rigged with its sea-shawl;
 sail-ropes were tightened, timbers drummed
 and stiff winds kept the wave-crosser
 skimming ahead; as she heaved forward,
 her foamy neck was fleet and buoyant,
 1910 a lapped prow loping over currents,
 until finally the Geats caught sight of coastline
 and familiar cliffs. The keel reared up,
 wind lifted it home, it hit on the land.
 The harbor guard came hurrying out
 to the rolling water: he had watched the offing
 1915 long and hard, on the lookout for those friends.
 With the anchor cables, he moored their craft
 right where it had beached, in case a backwash
 might catch the hull and carry it away.
 Then he ordered the prince's treasure-trove
 1920 to be carried ashore. It was a short step
 from there to where Hrethel's son and heir,
 Hygelac the gold-giver, makes his home
 on a secure cliff, in the company of retainers.
 The building was magnificent, the king majestic,
 1925 ensconced in his hall; and although Hygd, his queen,
 was young, a few short years at court,
 her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure.
 Haereth's daughter behaved generously
 and stinted nothing when she distributed
 1930 bounty to the Geats.

Great Queen Modthryth

perpetrated terrible wrongs.⁵

If any retainer ever made bold

to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's⁶

1935

stared at her directly during daylight,
the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound,
in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured
until doom was pronounced—death by the sword,
slash of blade, blood-gush, and death-qualms
in an evil display. Even a queen

1940

outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that.
A queen should weave peace, not punish the
innocent

with loss of life for imagined insults.

But Hemming's kinsman⁷ put a halt to her ways

1945

and drinkers round the table had another tale:
she was less of a bane to people's lives,
less cruel-minded, after she was married
to the brave Offa, a bride arrayed
in her gold finery, given away

1950

by a caring father, ferried to her young prince
over dim seas. In days to come
she would grace the throne and grow famous
for her good deeds and conduct of life,
her high devotion to the hero king

1955

who was the best king, it has been said,
between the two seas or anywhere else
on the face of the earth. Offa was honored
far and wide for his generous ways,
his fighting spirit and his farseeing
defense of his homeland; from him there sprang

1960

Eomer,

Garmund's grandson, kinsman of Hemming,⁸

his warriors' mainstay and master of the field.

Heroic Beowulf and his band of men

crossed the wide strand, striding along
the sandy foreshore; the sun shone,
1965 the world's candle warmed them from the south
as they hastened to where, as they had heard,
the young king, Ongentheow's killer
and his people's protector,⁹ was dispensing rings
inside his bawn. Beowulf's return
1970 was reported to Hygelac as soon as possible,
news that the captain was now in the enclosure,
his battle-brother back from the fray
alive and well, walking to the hall.
Room was quickly made, on the king's orders,
1975 and the troops filed across the cleared floor.
After Hygelac had offered greetings
to his loyal thane in a lofty speech,
he and his kinsman, that hale survivor,
sat face to face. Haereth's daughter
1980 moved about with the mead-jug in her hand,
taking care of the company, filling the cups
that warriors held out. Then Hygelac began
to put courteous questions to his old comrade
in the high hall. He hankered to know
1985 every tale the Sea-Geats had to tell:
"How did you fare on your foreign voyage,
dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided
to sail away across the salt water
and fight at Heorot? Did you help Hrothgar
1990 much in the end? Could you ease the prince
of his well-known troubles? Your undertaking
cast my spirits down, I dreaded the outcome
of your expedition and pleaded with you
long and hard to leave the killer be,
1995 let the South-Danes settle their own
blood-feud with Grendel. So God be thanked
I am granted this sight of you, safe and sound."

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
 2000 "What happened, Lord Hygelac, is hardly a secret
 any more among men in this world—
 myself and Grendel coming to grips
 on the very spot where he visited destruction
 on the Victory-Shieldings and violated
 2005 life and limb, losses I avenged
 so no earthly offspring of Grendel's
 need ever boast of that bout before dawn,
 no matter how long the last of his evil
 family survives.

When I first landed

2010 I hastened to the ring-hall and saluted Hrothgar.
 Once he discovered why I had come,
 the son of Halfdane sent me immediately
 to sit with his own sons on the bench.
 It was a happy gathering. In my whole life
 2015 I have never seen mead enjoyed more
 in any hall on earth. Sometimes the queen
 herself appeared, peace-pledge between nations,
 to hearten the young ones and hand out
 a torque to a warrior, then take her place.
 2020 Sometimes Hrothgar's daughter distributed
 ale to older ranks, in order on the benches:
 I heard the company call her Freawaru
 as she made her rounds, presenting men
 with the gem-studded bowl, young bride-to-be
 2025 to the gracious Ingeld,¹ in her gold-trimmed attire.
 The friend of the Shieldings favors her betrothal:
 the guardian of the kingdom sees good in it
 and hopes this woman will heal old wounds
 and grievous feuds.

But generally the spear

2030 is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,
 no matter how admirable the bride may be.

“Think how the Heatho-Bards are bound to feel,
their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,
when he walks in with that woman to the feast:
Danes are at the table, being entertained,
2035 honored guests in glittering regalia,
burnished ring-mail that was their hosts’ birthright,
looted when the Heatho-Bards could no longer wield
their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went
down
with their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.
2040 Then an old spearman will speak while they are
drinking,
having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive
memories of the massacre; his mood will darken
and heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion,
he will begin to test a young man’s temper
2045 and stir up trouble, starting like this:
‘Now, my friend, don’t you recognize
your father’s sword, his favorite weapon,
the one he wore when he went out in his war-mask
to face the Danes on that final day?
2050 After Withergeld² died and his men were doomed,
the Shieldings quickly claimed the field;
and now here’s a son of one or other
of those same killers coming through our hall
overbearing us, mouthing boasts,
2055 and rigged in armor that by right is yours.’
And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,
working things up with bitter words
until one of the lady’s retainers lies
spattered in blood, split open
2060 on his father’s account.³ The killer knows
the lie of the land and escapes with his life.
Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
will break the peace, a passionate hate

2065 will build up in Ingeld, and love for his bride
will falter in him as the feud rankles.
I therefore suspect the good faith of the Heatho-
Bards,
the truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness
of their alliance with the Danes.

2070 But now, my lord,
I shall carry on with my account of Grendel,
the whole story of everything that happened
in the hand-to-hand fight.

2075 After heaven's gem
had gone mildly to earth, that maddened spirit,
the terror of those twilights, came to attack us
where we stood guard, still safe inside the hall.
There deadly violence came down on Hondscio
and he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,
rigged out for the combat. A comrade from our ranks
had come to grief in Grendel's maw:
he ate up the entire body.

2080 There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and
furious,
all roused up, yet still unready
to leave the hall empty-handed;
renowned for his might, he matched himself against
me,
wildly reaching. He had this roomy pouch,

2085 a strange accoutrement, intricately strung
and hung at the ready, a rare patchwork
of devilishly fitted dragon-skins.
I had done him no wrong, yet the raging demon
wanted to cram me and many another

2090 into this bag—but it was not to be
once I got to my feet in a blind fury.
It would take too long to tell how I repaid
the terror of the land for every life he took
and so won credit for you, my king,

2095 and for all your people. And although he got away
to enjoy life's sweetness for a while longer,
his right hand stayed behind him in Heorot,
evidence of his miserable overthrow
as he dived into murk on the mere bottom.

2100 "I got lavish rewards from the lord of the Danes
for my part in the battle, beaten gold
and much else, once morning came
and we took our places at the banquet table.
There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,

2105 a carrier of stories, recalled the early days.
At times some hero made the timbered harp
tremble with sweetness, or related true
and tragic happenings; at times the king
gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale;

2110 or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,
would begin to remember the martial deeds
of his youth and prime and be overcome
as the past welled up in his wintry heart.

2115 "We were happy there the whole day long
and enjoyed our time until another night
descended upon us. Then suddenly
the vehement mother avenged her son
and wreaked destruction. Death had robbed her,
Geats had slain Grendel, so his ghastly dam

2120 struck back and with bare-faced defiance
laid a man low. Thus life departed
from the sage Aeschere, an elder wise in counsel.
But afterward, on the morning following,
the Danes could not burn the dead body

2125 nor lay the remains of the man they loved
on his funeral pyre. She had fled with the corpse
and taken refuge beneath torrents on the mountain.
It was a hard blow for Hrothgar to bear,
harder than any he had undergone before.

2130 And so the heartsore king beseeched me

in your royal name to take my chances
underwater, to win glory
and prove my worth. He promised me rewards.
Hence, as is well known, I went to my encounter
2135 with the terror-monger at the bottom of the tarn.
For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,
then blood went curling along the currents
and I beheaded Grendel's mother in the hall
with a mighty sword. I barely managed
2140 to escape with my life; my time had not yet come.
But Halfdane's heir, the shelter of those earls,
again endowed me with gifts in abundance.
"Thus the king acted with due custom.
I was paid and recompensed completely,
2145 given full measure and the freedom to choose
from Hrothgar's treasures by Hrothgar himself.
These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace
that all favor depends. I have few kinsmen
2150 who are close, my king, except for your kind self."
Then he ordered the boar-framed standard to be
brought,
the battle-topping helmet, the mail-shirt gray as
hoar-frost,
and the precious war-sword; and proceeded with his
speech:
"When Hrothgar presented this war-gear to me
2155 he instructed me, my lord, to give you some account
of why it signifies his special favor.
He said it had belonged to his older brother,
King Heorogar, who had long kept it,
but that Heorogar had never bequeathed it
2160 to his son Heoroward, that worthy scion,
loyal as he was. Enjoy it well."
I heard four horses were handed over next.
Beowulf bestowed four bay steeds

2165 to go with the armor, swift gallopers,
all alike. So ought a kinsman act,
instead of plotting and planning in secret
to bring people to grief, or conspiring to arrange
the death of comrades. The warrior king
2170 was uncle to Beowulf and honored by his nephew:
each was concerned for the other's good.
I heard he presented Hygd with a gorget,
the priceless torque that the prince's daughter,
Wealhtheow, had given him; and three horses,
supple creatures brilliantly saddled.
2175 The bright necklace would be luminous on Hygd's
breast.
Thus Beowulf bore himself with valor;
he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honor
and took no advantage; never cut down
2180 a comrade who was drunk, kept his temper
and, warrior that he was, watched and controlled
his God-sent strength and his outstanding
natural powers. He had been poorly regarded
for a long time, was taken by the Geats
2185 for less than he was worth:⁴ and their lord too
had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
They firmly believed that he lacked force,
that the prince was a weakling; but presently
every affront to his deserving was reversed.
2190 The battle-famed king, bulwark of his earls,
ordered a gold-chased heirloom of Hrethel's⁵
to be brought in; it was the best example
of a gem-studded sword in the Geat treasury.
This he laid on Beowulf's lap
2195 and then rewarded him with land as well,
seven thousand hides; and a hall and a throne.
Both owned land by birth in that country,
ancestral grounds; but the greater right

and sway were inherited by the higher born.

Endnotes

- Note 5: The story of Queen Modthryth's vices is abruptly introduced as a foil to Queen Hygd's virtues. A transitional passage may have been lost, but the poet's device is similar to that of using the earlier reference to the wickedness of King Heremod to contrast with the good qualities of Sigemund and Beowulf.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: This could refer to her husband or her father before her marriage. The story resembles folktales about a proud princess whose unsuccessful suitors are all put to death, although the unfortunate victims in this case seem to be guilty only of looking at her.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, Offa I, a legendary king of the Angles. We know nothing about Hemming other than that Offa was related to him. Offa II was king of Mercia (757–96), and although the story is about the second Offa's ancestor on the Continent, this is the only English connection in the poem and has been taken as evidence to date its origins to 8th-century Mercia.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, Eomer, Offa's son. See previous note. Garmund was presumably the name of Offa's father.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, Hygelac. Ongentheow was king of the Swedish people called the Shylfings. This is the first of the references to wars between the Geats and the Swedes. One of Hygelac's war party named Eofer was the actual slayer of Ongentheow.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: King of the Heatho-Bards; his father, Froda, was killed by the Danes.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: One of the Heatho-Bard leaders.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, the young Danish attendant is killed because his father killed the father of the young Heatho-Bard who has been

egged on by the old veteran of that campaign.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: There is no other mention of Beowulf's unpromising youth. This motif of the "Cinderella hero" and others, such as Grendel's magic pouch, are examples of folklore material, probably circulating orally, that made its way into the poem.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.[Return to reference 5](#)

[THE DRAGON WAKES]

2200 A lot was to happen in later days
in the fury of battle. Hygelac fell
and the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless
against the fierce aggression of the Shylfings:⁶
ruthless swordsmen, seasoned campaigners,
they came against him and his conquering nation,
2205 and with cruel force cut him down
so that afterwards
the wide kingdom
reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
for fifty winters, grew old and wise
as warden of the land
2210 until one began
to dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
from the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden
passage,
unknown to men, but someone⁷ managed
to enter by it and interfere
2215 with the heathen trove. He had handled and
removed
a gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing,
though with a thief's wiles he had outwitted
the sleeping dragon. That drove him into rage,
as the people of that country would soon discover.
2220 The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
and moved him to wrath had never meant to.
It was desperation on the part of a slave
fleeing the heavy hand of some master,
guilt-ridden and on the run,
2225 going to ground. But he soon began
to shake with terror;⁸ in shock

the wretch
. panicked and ran
away with the precious
2230 metalwork. There were many other
heirlooms heaped inside the earth-house,
because long ago, with deliberate care,
some forgotten person had deposited the whole
rich inheritance of a highborn race
2235 in this ancient cache. Death had come
and taken them all in times gone by
and the only one left to tell their tale,
the last of their line, could look forward to nothing
but the same fate for himself: he foresaw that his
2240 joy
in the treasure would be brief.

A newly constructed
barrow stood waiting, on a wide headland
close to the waves, its entryway secured.
Into it the keeper of the hoard had carried
all the goods and golden ware
2245 worth preserving. His words were few:
"Now, earth, hold what earls once held
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
by honorable men. My own people
have been ruined in war; one by one
2250 they went down to death, looked their last
on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
to bear a sword or to burnish plated goblets,
put a sheen on the cup. The companies have
departed.
The hard helmet, hasped with gold,
2255 will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner
who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;
the coat of mail that came through all fights,
through shield-collapse and cut of sword,
decays with the warrior. Nor may webbed mail

range far and wide on the warlord's back
2260 beside his mustered troops. No trembling harp,
no tuned timber, no tumbling hawk
swerving through the hall, no swift horse
pawing the courtyard. Pillage and slaughter
2265 have emptied the earth of entire peoples."
And so he mourned as he moved about the world,
deserted and alone, lamenting his unhappiness
day and night, until death's flood
brimmed up in his heart.
2270 Then an old harrower of the
dark
happened to find the hoard open,
the burning one who hunts out barrows,
the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
with streamers of fire. People on the farms
are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out
2275 hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold
through age-long vigils, though to little avail.
For three centuries, this scourge of the people
had stood guard on that stoutly protected
underground treasury, until the intruder
2280 unleashed its fury; he hurried to his lord
with the gold-plated cup and made his plea
to be reinstated. Then the vault was rifled,
the ring-hoard robbed, and the wretched man
had his request granted. His master gazed
2285 on that find from the past for the first time.
When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.
He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger
when he saw the footprints of the prowler who had
stolen
too close to his dreaming head.
2290 So may a man not marked by fate
easily escape exile and woe
by the grace of God.

The hoard-guardian
scorched the ground as he scoured and hunted
for the trespasser who had troubled his sleep.
2295 Hot and savage, he kept circling and circling
the outside of the mound. No man appeared
in that desert waste, but he worked himself up
by imagining battle; then back in he'd go
in search of the cup, only to discover
2300 signs that someone had stumbled upon
the golden treasures. So the guardian of the mound,
the hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming
with fierce impatience; his pent-up fury
at the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back
2305 and lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,
the day waned and he could wait no longer
behind the wall, but hurtled forth
in a fiery blaze. The first to suffer
were the people on the land, but before long
2310 it was their treasure-giver who would come to grief.
The dragon began to belch out flames
and burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow
that scared everyone, for the vile sky-winger
would leave nothing alive in his wake.
2315 Everywhere the havoc he wrought was in evidence.
Far and near, the Geat nation
bore the brunt of his brutal assaults
and virulent hate. Then back to the hoard
he would dart before daybreak, to hide in his den.
2320 He had swung the land, swathed it in flame,
in fire and burning, and now he felt secure
in the vaults of his barrow; but his trust was
unavailing.
Then Beowulf was given bad news,
the hard truth: his own home,
2325 the best of buildings, had been burned to a cinder,
the throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero

into deep anguish and darkened his mood:
the wise man thought he must have thwarted
ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord,
2330 broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil,
unaccustomed anxiety and gloom
confused his brain; the fire-dragon
had razed the coastal region and reduced
forts and earthworks to dust and ashes,
2335 so the war-king planned and plotted his revenge.
The warriors' protector, prince of the hall-troop,
ordered a marvelous all-iron shield
from his smithy works. He well knew
that linden boards would let him down
2340 and timber burn. After many trials,
he was destined to face the end of his days,
in this mortal world, as was the dragon,
for all his long leasehold on the treasure.
Yet the prince of the rings was too proud
2345 to line up with a large army
against the sky-plague. He had scant regard
for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all
of its courage or strength, for he had kept going
often in the past, through perils and ordeals
2350 of every sort, after he had purged
Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot
and beaten Grendel. He outgrappled the monster
and his evil kin.

One of his crudest
hand-to-hand encounters had happened
2355 when Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed
in Friesland: the people's friend and lord,
Hrethel's son, slaked a swordblade's
thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious
gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety:
2360 he arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty
battle-dresses, the booty he had won.

There was little for the Hetware⁹ to be happy about
as they shielded their faces and fighting on the
ground
began in earnest. With Beowulf against them,
2365 few could hope to return home.
Across the wide sea, desolate and alone,
the son of Ecgtheow swam back to his people.
There Hygd offered him throne and authority
as lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead,
2370 she had no belief in her son's ability
to defend their homeland against foreign invaders.
Yet there was no way the weakened nation
could get Beowulf to give in and agree
to be elevated over Heardred as his lord
2375 or to undertake the office of kingship.
But he did provide support for the prince,
honored and minded him until he matured
as the ruler of Geatland.

Then over sea-roads

2380 exiles arrived, sons of Ohthere.¹
They had rebelled against the best of all
the sea-kings in Sweden, the one who held sway
in the Shylfing nation, their renowned prince,
lord of the mead-hall. That marked the end
for Hygelac's son: his hospitality
2385 was mortally rewarded with wounds from a sword.
Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned
to the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf
to ascend the throne, to sit in majesty
and rule over the Geats. He was a good king.
2390 In days to come, he contrived to avenge
the fall of his prince; he befriended Eadgils
when Eadgils was friendless, aiding his cause
with weapons and warriors over the wide sea,
2395 sending him men. The feud was settled

on a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela.
And so the son of Ecgtheow had survived
every extreme, excelling himself
in daring and in danger, until the day arrived
when he had to come face to face with the dragon.
2400 The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades
and went in a rage to reconnoiter.
By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction
being visited on the people. The precious cup
had come to him from the hand of the finder,
2405 the one who had started all this strife
and was now added as a thirteenth to their number.
They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature
to be their guide. Against his will
he led them to the earth-vault he alone knew,
2410 an underground barrow near the sea-billows
and heaving waves, heaped inside
with exquisite metalwork. The one who stood guard
was dangerous and watchful, warden of the trove
buried under earth: no easy bargain
2415 would be made in that place by any man.
The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
2420 His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:
it would soon claim his coffered soul,
part life from limb. Before long
the prince's spirit would spin free from his body.
Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
2425 "Many a skirmish I survived when I was young
and many times of war: I remember them well.
At seven, I was fostered out by my father,
left in the charge of my people's lord.
King Hrethel kept me and took care of me,
2430 was openhanded, behaved like a kinsman.

While I was his ward, he treated me no worse
as a wean² about the place than one of his own
boys,
Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac.
For the eldest, Herebeald, an unexpected
2435 deathbed was laid out, through a brother's doing,
when Haethcyn bent his horn-tipped bow
and loosed the arrow that destroyed his life.
He shot wide and buried a shaft
in the flesh and blood of his own brother.
2440 That offense was beyond redress; a wrongfooting
of the heart's affections; for who could avenge
the prince's life or pay his death-price?
It was like the misery endured by an old man
who has lived to see his son's body
2445 swing on the gallows. He begins to keen
and weep for his boy, watching the raven
gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help.
The wisdom of age is worthless to him.
Morning after morning, he wakes to remember
2450 that his child is gone; he has no interest
in living on until another heir
is born in the hall, now that his first-born
has entered death's dominion forever.
He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,
2455 the banquet hall bereft of all delight,
the windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are
sleeping,
the warriors under ground; what was is no more.
No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard.
Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed
2460 and sings a lament; everything seems too large,
the steadings and the fields.
Such was the feeling
of loss endured by the lord of the Geats

after Herebeald's death. He was helplessly placed
to set to rights the wrong committed,
2465 could not punish the killer in accordance with the law
of the blood-feud, although he felt no love for him.
Heartsore, wearied, he turned away
from life's joys, chose God's light
and departed, leaving buildings and lands
2470 to his sons, as a man of substance will.

"Then over the wide sea Swedes and Geats
battled and feuded and fought without quarter.
Hostilities broke out when Hrethel died.³
Ongentheow's sons were unrelenting,
2475 refusing to make peace, campaigning violently
from coast to coast, constantly setting up
terrible ambushes around Hreosnahl.
My own kith and kin avenged
these evil events, as everybody knows,
2480 but the price was high: one of them paid
with his life. Haethcyn, lord of the Geats,
met his fate there and fell in the battle.
Then, as I have heard, Hygelac's sword
was raised in the morning against Ongentheow,
2485 his brother's killer. When Eofor cleft
the old Swede's helmet, halved it open,
he fell, death-pale: his feud-calloused hand
could not stave off the fatal stroke.

"The treasures that Hygelac lavished on me
2490 I paid for when I fought, as fortune allowed me,
with my glittering sword. He gave me land
and the security land brings, so he had no call
to go looking for some lesser champion,
some mercenary from among the Gifthas
2495 or the Spear-Danes or the men of Sweden.
I marched ahead of him, always there
at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that

2500 for as long as I live, as long as this sword
 shall last, which has stood me in good stead
 late and soon, ever since I killed
 Dayraven the Frank in front of the two armies.
 He brought back no looted breastplate
 to the Frisian king but fell in battle,
 2505 their standard-bearer, highborn and brave.
 No sword blade sent him to his death:
 my bare hands stilled his heartbeats
 and wrecked the bone-house. Now blade and hand,
 sword and sword-stroke, will assay the hoard."

Endnotes

- Note 6:
 There are several references, some of them lengthy, to the wars between the Geats and the Swedes. Because these are highly allusive and not in chronological order, they are difficult to follow and keep straight. This outline, along with the Genealogies (pp. 40–42), may serve as a guide. *Phase 1*: After the death of the Geat patriarch, King Hrethel (lines 2462–70), Ohthere and Onela, the sons of the Swedish king Ongentheow, invade Geat territory and inflict heavy casualties in a battle at Hreosnahl (lines 2472–78). *Phase 2*: The Geats invade Sweden under Haethcyn, King Hrethel's son who has succeeded him. At the battle of Ravenswood, the Geats capture Ongentheow's queen, but Ongentheow counterattacks, rescues the queen, and kills Haethcyn. Hygelac, Haethcyn's younger brother, arrives with reinforcements; Ongentheow is killed in savage combat with two of Hygelac's men; and the Swedes are routed (lines 2479–89 and 2922–90). *Phase 3*: Eanmund and Eadgils, the sons of Ohthere (presumably dead), are driven into exile by their uncle Onela, who is now king of the Swedes. They are given refuge by Hygelac's son Heardred, who has succeeded his father. Onela invades Geatland and kills Heardred; his retainer Weohstan kills

Eanmund; and after the Swedes withdraw, Beowulf becomes king (lines 2204–8, which follow, and 2379–90). *Phase 4*: Eadgils, supported by Beowulf, invades Sweden and kills Onela (lines 2391–96).

[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: The following section was damaged by fire. In lines 2215–31 entire words and phrases are missing or indicated by only a few letters. Editorial attempts to reconstruct the text are conjectural and often disagree.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Lines 2227–30 are so damaged that they defy guesswork to reconstruct them.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A tribe of the Franks allied with the Frisians.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: See p. 89, n. 6, Phases 3 and 4.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A young child (Northern Ireland) [*Translator's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See p. 89, n. 6, Phases 1 and 2.[Return to reference 3](#)

[BEOWULF ATTACKS THE DRAGON]

2510 Beowulf spoke, made a formal boast
for the last time: "I risked my life
often when I was young. Now I am old,
but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight
for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only
abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open."
2515 Then he addressed each dear companion
one final time, those fighters in their helmets,
resolute and highborn: "I would rather not
use a weapon if I knew another way
to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast
2520 as I did against Grendel in days gone by.
But I shall be meeting molten venom
in the fire he breathes, so I go forth
in mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot
when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the
2525 wall
between the two of us will turn out as fate,
overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.
I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe.
"Men-at-arms, remain here on the barrow,
safe in your armor, to see which one of us
2530 is better in the end at bearing wounds
in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,
nor is it up to any man except me
to measure his strength against the monster
or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
2535 by my courage, or else mortal combat,
doom of battle, will bear your lord away."
Then he drew himself up beside his shield.
The fabled warrior in his war-shirt and helmet
trusted in his own strength entirely

and went under the crag. No coward path.
2540 Hard by the rock-face that hale veteran,
a good man who had gone repeatedly
into combat and danger and come through,
saw a stone arch and a gushing stream
2545 that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting
a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive
unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm
against the dragon in those flaming depths.
Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats
2550 unburdened his breast and broke out
in a storm of anger. Under gray stone
his voice challenged and resounded clearly.
Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized
a human voice, the time was over
2555 for peace and parleying. Pouring forth
in a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster
burst from the rock. There was a rumble under
ground.
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior
lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
2560 writhed and convulsed and viciously
turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,
an heirloom inherited by ancient right,
was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
each antagonist struck terror in the other.
2565 Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
by his tall shield, sure of his ground,
while the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
and racing toward its fate. Yet his shield defended
2570 the renowned leader's life and limb
for a shorter time than he meant it to:
that final day was the first time
when Beowulf fought and fate denied him
glory in battle. So the king of the Geats

2575 raised his hand and struck hard
at the enameled scales, but scarcely cut through:
the blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
had need of at that moment. The mound-keeper
2580 went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
when he felt the stroke, battle-fire
billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled
of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
infallible before that day,
2585 failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should
have.

For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
to have to give ground like that and go
unwillingly to inhabit another home
in a place beyond; so every man must yield
2590 the leasehold of his days.

Before long
the fierce contenders clashed again.
The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up
and got a new wind; he who had once ruled
was furred in fire and had to face the worst.
2595 No help or backing was to be had then
from his highborn comrades; that hand-picked troop
broke ranks and ran for their lives
to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
2600 the claims of kinship cannot be denied.
His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,
a well-regarded Shyfling warrior
related to Aelfhere.⁴ When he saw his lord
tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
2605 he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,
how well he lived among the Waegmundings,
the freehold he inherited from his father⁵ before him.

He could not hold back: one hand brandished
the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword
2610 —

an ancient blade that was said to have belonged
to Eanmund, the son of Ohthere, the one
Weohstan had slain when he was an exile without
friends.

He carried the arms to the victim's kinfolk,
the burnished helmet, the webbed chain-mail
2615 and that relic of the giants. But Onela returned
the weapons to him, rewarded Weohstan
with Eanmund's war-gear. He ignored the blood-
feud,

the fact that Eanmund was his brother's son.⁶
Weohstan kept that war-gear for a lifetime,
2620 the sword and the mail-shirt, until it was the son's
turn

to follow his father and perform his part.
Then, in old age, at the end of his days
among the Weather-Geats, he bequeathed to Wiglaf
innumerable weapons.

2625 And now the youth
was to enter the line of battle with his lord,
his first time to be tested as a fighter.
His spirit did not break and the ancestral blade
would keep its edge, as the dragon discovered
as soon as they came together in the combat.

2630 Sad at heart, addressing his companions,
Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:
"I remember that time when mead was flowing,
how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
promised our ring-giver we would be worth our
2635 price,

make good the gift of the war-gear,
those swords and helmets, as and when

his need required it. He picked us out
from the army deliberately, honored us and judged
us

2640 fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—
and all because he considered us the best
of his arms-bearing thanes. And now, although
he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face
by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,
2645 a man unequaled in the quest for glory
and a name for daring—now the day has come
when this lord we serve needs sound men
to give him their support. Let us go to him,
help our leader through the hot flame
and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,
2650 I would rather my body were robed in the same
burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
than go back home bearing arms.
That is unthinkable, unless we have first
slain the foe and defended the life
2655 of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know
the things he has done for us deserve better.
Should he alone be left exposed
to fall in battle? We must bond together,
shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."
2660 Then he waded the dangerous reek and went
under arms to his lord, saying only:
"Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
you said you would when you were still young
and vowed you would never let your name and fame
2665 be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
so stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now
with the whole of your strength. I shall stand by
you."
After those words, a wildness rose
in the dragon again and drove it to attack,
2670 heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,

the humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
charred it to the boss, and the body armor
on the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
2675 Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered
in sparks and ashes.

Inspired again
by the thought of glory, the war-king threw
his whole strength behind a sword stroke
and connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped.
2680 Beowulf's ancient iron-gray sword
let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
to be helped in combat by the cutting edge
of weapons made of iron. When he wielded a sword,
no matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade,
2685 his hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no
advantage.

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing
dragon,
was mad to attack for a third time.
When a chance came, he caught the hero
2690 in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
into his neck. Beowulf's body
ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.
Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
saw the king in danger at his side
2695 and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.
He left the head alone,⁷ but his fighting hand
was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid.
He lunged at the enemy lower down
so that his decorated sword sank into its belly
2700 and the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king
gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife

he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep in the dragon's flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
2705 They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;
that pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,
had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,
be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,
2710 this would be the last of his many labors
and triumphs in the world.

Then the wound
dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
to scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
deadly poison suppurating inside him,
surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,
2715 the prince realized his state and struggled
toward a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze
on those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork
was braced with arches built over columns.
And now that thane unequaled for goodness
2720 with his own hands washed his lord's wounds,
swabbed the weary prince with water,
bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.
Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds,
mortal wounds, he still spoke
2725 for he well knew his days in the world
had been lived out to the end—his allotted time
was drawing to a close, death was very near.

"Now is the time when I would have wanted
to bestow this armor on my own son,
2730 had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir
and live on in his flesh. For fifty years
I ruled this nation. No king
of any neighboring clan would dare
face me with troops, none had the power
2735 to intimidate me. I took what came,
cared for and stood by things in my keeping,

never fomented quarrels, never
swore to a lie. All this consoles me,
doomed as I am and sickening for death;
2740 because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind
need never blame me when the breath leaves my
body
for murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly,
dearest Wiglaf, under the gray stone
where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure;
2745 hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard.
Away you go: I want to examine
that ancient gold, gaze my fill
on those garnered jewels; my going will be easier
for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-
2750 go
of the life and lordship I have long maintained.”
And so, I have heard, the son of Weohstan
quickly obeyed the command of his languishing
war-weary lord; he went in his chain-mail
under the rock-piled roof of the barrow,
2755 exulting in his triumph, and saw beyond the seat
a treasure-trove of astonishing richness,
wall-hangings that were a wonder to behold,
glittering gold spread across the ground,
the old dawn-scorching serpent’s den
2760 packed with goblets and vessels from the past,
tarnished and corroding. Rusty helmets
all eaten away. Armbands everywhere,
artfully wrought. How easily treasure
buried in the ground, gold hidden
2765 however skillfully, can escape from any man!
And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold,
hanging high over the hoard,
a masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light
so he could make out the ground at his feet
2770

and inspect the valuables. Of the dragon there was
no
remaining sign: the sword had dispatched him.
Then, the story goes, a certain man
plundered the hoard in that immemorial howe,
filled his arms with flagons and plates,
2775 anything he wanted; and took the standard also,
most brilliant of banners.

Already the blade
of the old king's sharp killing-sword
had done its worst: the one who had for long
minded the hoard, hovering over gold,
2780 unleashing fire, surging forth
midnight after midnight, had been mown down.
Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,
excited by the treasure. Anxiety weighed
on his brave heart—he was hoping he would find
2785 the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him
helpless, earlier, on the open ground.
So he came to the place, carrying the treasure
and found his lord bleeding profusely,
his life at an end; again he began
2790 to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance
broke out from the king's breast-cage.
The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

"To the everlasting Lord of all,
to the King of Glory, I give thanks
2795 that I behold this treasure here in front of me,
that I have been allowed to leave my people
so well endowed on the day I die.
Now that I have bartered my last breath
to own this fortune, it is up to you
2800 to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.
Order my troop to construct a barrow
on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has
cooled.

2805 It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness⁸
 and be a reminder among my people—
 so that in coming times crews under sail
 will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer
 ships across the wide and shrouded waters."
 Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
 2810 the collar of gold from his neck and gave it
 to the young thane, telling him to use
 it and the war-shirt and gilded helmet well.
 "You are the last of us, the only one left
 of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
 2815 sent my whole brave highborn clan
 to their final doom. Now I must follow them."
 That was the warrior's last word.
 He had no more to confide. The furious heat
 of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his
 breast
 2820 to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

Endnotes

- Note 4: Although Wiglaf is here said to be a Shylfing (a Swede), in line 2607 we are told his family are Waegmundings, a clan of the Geats, which is also Beowulf's family. It was possible for a family to owe allegiance to more than one nation and to shift sides as a result of feuds. Nothing is known of Aelfhere. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, Weohstan, who, as explained below, was the slayer of Onela's nephew Eanmund. Possibly, Weohstan joined the Geats under Beowulf after Eanmund's brother, with Beowulf's help, avenged Eanmund's death on Onela and became king of the Shylfings. See p. 89, n. 6, Phase 2. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An ironic comment: since Onela wanted to kill Eanmund, he rewarded Weohstan for killing his nephew instead

of exacting compensation or revenge.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: That is, he avoided the dragon's flame-breathing head.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A headland by the sea. The name means "Whalesness."[Return to reference 8](#)

[BEOWULF'S FUNERAL]

It was hard then on the young hero,
having to watch the one he held so dear
there on the ground, going through
his death agony. The dragon from underearth,
his nightmarish destroyer, lay destroyed as well,
2825 utterly without life. No longer would his snakefolds
ply themselves to safeguard hidden gold.
Hard-edged blades, hammered out
and keenly filed, had finished him
so that the sky-roamer lay there rigid,
2830 brought low beside the treasure-lodge.
Never again would he glitter and glide
and show himself off in midnight air,
exulting in his riches: he fell to earth
through the battle-strength in Beowulf's arm.
2835 There were few, indeed, as far as I have heard,
big and brave as they may have been,
few who would have held out if they had had to face
the outpourings of that poison-breather
or gone foraging on the ring-hall floor
2840 and found the deep barrow-dweller
on guard and awake.

The treasure had been won,
bought and paid for by Beowulf's death.
Both had reached the end of the road
through the life they had been lent.

2845 Before long
the battle-dodgers abandoned the wood,
the ones who had let down their lord earlier,
the tail-turners, ten of them together.
When he needed them most, they had made off.
Now they were ashamed and came behind shields,

in their battle-outfits, to where the old man lay.
2850 They watched Wiglaf, sitting worn out,
a comrade shoulder to shoulder with his lord,
trying in vain to bring him round with water.
Much as he wanted to, there was no way
2855 he could preserve his lord's life on earth
or alter in the least the Almighty's will.
What God judged right would rule what happened
to every man, as it does to this day.
Then a stern rebuke was bound to come
2860 from the young warrior to the ones who had been
cowards.
Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke
disdainfully and in disappointment:
"Anyone ready to admit the truth
2865 will surely realize that the lord of men
who showered you with gifts and gave you the
armor
you are standing in—when he would distribute
helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-
benches,
a prince treating his thanes in hall
to the best he could find, far or near—
2870 was throwing weapons uselessly away.
It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.
Beowulf had little cause to brag
about his armed guard; yet God who ordains
who wins or loses allowed him to strike
2875 with his own blade when bravery was needed.
There was little I could do to protect his life
in the heat of the fray, but I found new strength
welling up when I went to help him.
Then my sword connected and the deadly assaults
2880 of our foe grew weaker, the fire coursed
less strongly from his head. But when the worst
happened

too few rallied around the prince.

2885 “So it is good-bye now to all you know and love
on your home ground, the open-handedness,
the giving of war-swords. Every one of you
with freeholds of land, our whole nation,
will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
get tidings of how you turned and fled
and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner
2890 die than live a life of shame.”

Then he ordered the outcome of the fight to be
reported
to those camped on the ridge, that crowd of
retainers

who had sat all morning, sad at heart,
shield-bearers wondering about
2895 the man they loved: would this day be his last
or would he return? He told the truth
and did not balk, the rider who bore
news to the cliff-top. He addressed them all:

2900 “Now the people’s pride and love,
the lord of the Geats, is laid on his deathbed,
brought down by the dragon’s attack.

Beside him lies the bane of his life,
dead from knife-wounds. There was no way
Beowulf could manage to get the better
2905 of the monster with his sword. Wiglaf sits
at Beowulf’s side, the son of Weohstan,
the living warrior watching by the dead,
keeping weary vigil, holding a wake
for the loved and the loathed.

2910 Now war is looming
over our nation, soon it will be known
to Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
that the king is gone. Hostility has been great
among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth
at the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:

2915 there the Hetware harried and attacked
and overwhelmed him with great odds.
The leader in his war-gear was laid low,
fell among followers: that lord did not favor
2920 his company with spoils. The Merovingian king
has been an enemy to us ever since.
“Nor do I expect peace or pact-keeping
of any sort from the Swedes. Remember:
at Ravenswood,⁹ Ongentheow
slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel’s son,
2925 when the Geat people in their arrogance
first attacked the fierce Shylfings.
The return blow was quickly struck
by Ohthere’s father.¹ Old and terrible,
he felled the sea-king and saved his own
2930 aged wife, the mother of Onela
and of Ohthere, bereft of her gold rings.
Then he kept hard on the heels of the foe
and drove them, leaderless, lucky to get away
in a desperate rout into Ravenswood.
2935 His army surrounded the weary remnant
where they nursed their wounds; all through the
night
he howled threats at those huddled survivors,
promised to axe their bodies open
when dawn broke, dangle them from gallows
2940 to feed the birds. But at first light
when their spirits were lowest, relief arrived.
They heard the sound of Hygelac’s horn,
his trumpet calling as he came to find them,
the hero in pursuit, at hand with troops.
2945 “The bloody swathe that Swedes and Geats
cut through each other was everywhere.
No one could miss their murderous feuding.
Then the old man made his move,

2950 pulled back, barred his people in:
Ongentheow withdrew to higher ground.
Hygelac's pride and prowess as a fighter
were known to the earl; he had no confidence
that he could hold out against that horde of seamen,
2955 defend his wife and the ones he loved
from the shock of the attack. He retreated for shelter
behind the earthwall. Then Hygelac swooped
on the Swedes at bay, his banners swarmed
into their refuge, his Geat forces
drove forward to destroy the camp.
2960 There in his gray hairs, Ongentheow
was cornered, ringed around with swords.
And it came to pass that the king's fate
was in Eofor's hands,² and in his alone.
Wulf, son of Wonred, went for him in anger,
2965 split him open so that blood came spurting
from under his hair. The old hero
still did not flinch, but parried fast,
hit back with a harder stroke:
the king turned and took him on.
2970 Then Wonred's son, the brave Wulf,
could land no blow against the aged lord.
Ongentheow divided his helmet
so that he buckled and bowed his bloodied head
and dropped to the ground. But his doom held off.
2975 Though he was cut deep, he recovered again.
"With his brother down, the undaunted Eofor,
Hygelac's thane, hefted his sword
and smashed murderously at the massive helmet
past the lifted shield. And the king collapsed,
2980 the shepherd of people was sheared of life.
Many then hurried to help Wulf,
bandaged and lifted him, now that they were left
masters of the blood-soaked battle-ground.

2985 One warrior stripped the other,
looted Ongentheow's iron mail-coat,
his hard sword-hilt, his helmet too,
and carried the graith³ to King Hygelac,
he accepted the prize, promised fairly
that reward would come, and kept his word.
2990 For their bravery in action, when they arrived home,
Eofor and Wulf were overloaded
by Hrethel's son, Hygelac the Geat,
with gifts of land and linked rings
that were worth a fortune. They had won glory,
2995 so there was no gainsaying his generosity.
And he gave Eofor his only daughter
to bide at home with him, an honor and a bond.
"So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,
this vicious feud, I am convinced,
3000 is bound to revive; they will cross our borders
and attack in force when they find out
that Beowulf is dead. In days gone by
when our warriors fell and we were undefended,
he kept our coffers and our kingdom safe.
3005 He worked for the people, but as well as that
he behaved like a hero.
We must hurry now
to take a last look at the king
and launch him, lord and lavisher of rings,
on the funeral road. His royal pyre
3010 will melt no small amount of gold:
heaped there in a hoard, it was bought at heavy
cost,
and that pile of rings he paid for at the end
with his own life will go up with the flame,
be furled in fire: treasure no follower
3015 will wear in his memory, nor lovely woman
link and attach as a torque around her neck—

but often, repeatedly, in the path of exile
they shall walk bereft, bowed under woe,
now that their leader's laugh is silenced,
high spirits quenched. Many a spear
dawn-cold to the touch will be taken down
and waved on high; the swept harp
won't waken warriors, but the raven winging
darkly over the doomed will have news,
tidings for the eagle of how he hoked and ate,
how the wolf and he made short work of the dead." ⁴
Such was the drift of the dire report
that gallant man delivered. He got little wrong
in what he told and predicted.

The whole troop
rose in tears, then took their way
to the uncanny scene under Earnaness. ⁵
There, on the sand, where his soul had left him,
they found him at rest, their ring-giver
from days gone by. The great man
had breathed his last. Beowulf the king
had indeed met with a marvelous death.
But what they saw first was far stranger:
the serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,
lying facing him. The fire-dragon
was scaresomely burned, scorched all colors.
From head to tail, his entire length
was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth
on the night air once, then winged back
down to his den; but death owned him now,
he would never enter his earth-gallery again.
Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,
silent flagons, precious swords
eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been
while they waited their thousand winters under
ground.

That huge cache, gold inherited
from an ancient race, was under a spell—
which meant no one was ever permitted
to enter the ring-hall unless God Himself,
3055 mankind's Keeper, True King of Triumphs,
allowed some person pleasing to Him—
and in His eyes worthy—to open the hoard.
What came about brought to nothing
the hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden
3060 riches under the rock-face. First the dragon slew
that man among men, who in turn made fierce
amends
and settled the feud. Famous for his deeds
a warrior may be, but it remains a mystery
where his life will end, when he may no longer
3065 dwell in the mead-hall among his own.
So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty
and cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was
ignorant
of how his departure from the world would happen.
The highborn chiefs who had buried the treasure
3070 declared it until doomsday so accursed
that whoever robbed it would be guilty of wrong
and grimly punished for their transgression,
hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines.
Yet Beowulf's gaze at the gold treasure
when he first saw it had not been selfish.
3075 Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, spoke:
"Often when one man follows his own will
many are hurt. This happened to us.
Nothing we advised could ever convince
3080 the prince we loved, our land's guardian,
not to vex the custodian of the gold,
let him lie where he was long accustomed,
lurk there under earth until the end of the world.
He held to his high destiny. The hoard is laid bare,

3085 but at a grave cost; it was too cruel a fate
that forced the king to that encounter.
I have been inside and seen everything
amassed in the vault. I managed to enter
although no great welcome awaited me
under the earthwall. I quickly gathered up
3090 a huge pile of the priceless treasures
handpicked from the hoard and carried them here
where the king could see them. He was still himself,
alive, aware, and in spite of his weakness
he had many requests. He wanted me to greet you
3095 and order the building of a barrow that would crown
the site of his pyre, serve as his memorial,
in a commanding position, since of all men
to have lived and thrived and lorded it on earth
his worth and due as a warrior were the greatest.
3100 Now let us again go quickly
and feast our eyes on that amazing fortune
heaped under the wall. I will show the way
and take you close to those coffers packed with rings
and bars of gold. Let a bier be made
3105 and got ready quickly when we come out
and then let us bring the body of our lord,
the man we loved, to where he will lodge
for a long time in the care of the Almighty.”
Then Weohstan’s son, stalwart to the end,
3110 had orders given to owners of dwellings,
many people of importance in the land,
to fetch wood from far and wide
for the good man’s pyre:

“Now shall flame consume
our leader in battle, the blaze darken
3115 round him who stood his ground in the steel-hail,
when the arrow-storm shot from bowstrings
pelted the shield-wall. The shaft hit home.
Feather-fledged, it finned the barb in flight.”

3120 Next the wise son of Weohstan
called from among the king's thanes
a group of seven: he selected the best
and entered with them, the eighth of their number,
under the God-cursed roof; one raised
a lighted torch and led the way.
3125 No lots were cast for who should loot the hoard
for it was obvious to them that every bit of it
lay unprotected within the vault,
there for the taking. It was no trouble
to hurry to work and haul out
3130 the priceless store. They pitched the dragon
over the cliff-top, let tide's flow
and backwash take the treasure-minder.
Then coiled gold was loaded on a cart
in great abundance, and the gray-haired leader,
3135 the prince on his bier, borne to Hronesness.
The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood foursquare,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armor, just as he had ordered.
3140 Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
3145 and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
3150 with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,

3155 slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the
smoke.
Then the Geat people began to construct
a mound on a headland, high and imposing,
a marker that sailors could see from far away,
and in ten days they had done the work.
3160 It was their hero's memorial; what remained from
the fire
they housed inside it, behind a wall
as worthy of him as their workmanship could make
it.
And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels
and a trove of such things as trespassing men
had once dared to drag from the hoard.
3165 They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,
gold under gravel, gone to earth,
as useless to men now as it ever was.
Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
chieftains' sons, champions in battle,
3170 all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the
proper thing,
3175 for a man should praise a prince whom he holds
dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth-companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
3180 They said that of all the kings upon earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

Endnotes

- Note 9: The messenger describes in greater detail the Battle of Ravenswood. See the outline of the Swedish wars on p. 89, n. 6.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, Ongentheow.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, he was at Eofor's mercy. Eofor's slaying of Ongentheow was described in lines 2486–89, where no mention is made of his brother Wulf's part in the battle. They are the sons of Wonred. *Eofor* means boar; *Wulf* is the Old English spelling of wolf.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Possessions, apparel.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The raven, eagle, and wolf—the scavengers who will feed on the slain—are “the beasts of battle,” a common motif in Germanic war poetry. “Hoked”: rooted about (Northern Ireland) [*Translator's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The site of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. The name means “Eaglesness.”[Return to reference 5](#)

JUDITH

Biblical narrative inspired Old English poetry from its earliest recorded beginnings: the poet Cædmon ([p. 30](#)) is said, for example, to have composed poetry on biblical subjects from Genesis to the Last Judgment. Although those texts do not survive, up to one-third of surviving Old English poetic texts are translations of biblical material. Prose writers also produced ambitious biblical translations: at the end of the tenth century Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham (died ca. 1010), made partial translations of many biblical texts that he worked into sermon material; an Old English version of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was compiled at about the same time. The prose translations are more or less faithful to the biblical text. The poetic translations, on the other hand, are much freer: they take liberties with the narrative and style of the biblical sources, reshaping plots and placing the stories within a recognizably Germanic cultural setting.

One of the biblical books from which Ælfric drew material was the book of Judith. This book was regarded as apocryphal (not authentically a part of the Old Testament) by Protestant churches from the sixteenth century, but for all pre- and post-Reformation Catholic readers it was an authentic part of the Hebrew Bible. The narrative recounts the campaign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to punish many subject peoples who had refused to join him in his successful war against Media (another ancient empire). Nebuchadnezzar's general Holofernes plunders and razes many cities that resist his army, and others capitulate to him. He lays

siege to the strategic Israelite town of Bethulia, which blocks his route to Jerusalem (Bethulia no longer exists, and its location in biblical times is uncertain). The leaders of the suffering and thirsty population of Bethulia are almost ready to surrender, but the pious, wealthy, and beautiful widow Judith rebukes them for their faintness of heart and promises to liberate them if they will hold out a few days longer. After praying to God in sackcloth and ashes, Judith dresses and adorns herself sumptuously. With only one servant she enters the enemy camp, where all, and especially Holofernes himself, are amazed at her beauty. She pretends to be fleeing a doomed people and persuades Holofernes that she will lead him to victory over all the Israelite cities. The Old English text begins four days after Judith's arrival, with Holofernes's invitation to his principal warriors to a banquet, after which he plans to go to bed with the beautiful Israelite. Judith, however, has other plans.

The poet of *Judith* translated from the Latin text of the Bible (the so-called Vulgate Bible, produced in the late fourth century). We do not know the date for this rendering of the book of Judith into Old English, but it was probably composed sometime in the tenth century (the one surviving text appears in the same late tenth-century manuscript that contains *Beowulf*). Neither do we know the motives for this translation. Ælfric, writing in the late tenth century, made his translation of Judith to encourage the English in defense of their territory against the invading Vikings. The text is, he says, "set down in our manner in English, as an example to you people that you should defend your land with weapons against the invading army."^{*}

The opening of the poetic *Judith* is lost (scholars estimate that some one hundred lines are missing), but from the remainder we can see that the poet has freely reshaped the biblical source and set the narrative within terms intelligible to an early medieval audience. The poet has stripped the geographical, historical, and political complexity of the story down to its bare essentials: the confrontation between Judith and Holofernes. Judith is the leader of an embattled people up against an exultant and terrifying enemy. Her only

resources are her unfailing courage, her wits, and her faith in God. Within this concentrated narrative, the poet colors certain episodes by employing the traditional language and formulas of Old English poetry. Holofernes, for example, becomes riotous at the feast; “the beasts of battle” anticipate and enjoy *their* feast (see *Beowulf*, lines 3023–27); Judith is rewarded with Holofernes’s battle gear, not with his household treasures as in the biblical narrative. Perhaps the most penetrating detail added by the Old English poet is the account of the net surrounding Holofernes’s bed, from which he can see out but cannot be seen inside. This technology of tyrannical power undermines Holofernes’s army in the end, since his men, waiting nervously around his bed because they are afraid to wake up their leader, lose precious time under attack from the Israelites.

Like the Abbess Hilda (see [p. 111](#), n. 1), Judith is one of the women of power in Old English history and literature. Another is St. Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine the Great: in the poem *Elene* she leads a Roman army to the Holy Land to discover the Cross on which Christ was crucified.

Endnotes

- Note *: *The Old English Heptateuch*, ed. S. J. Crawford, Early English Text Society 160 (London, 1922), p. 48.[Return to reference *](#)

Judith¹

. . . She doubted
gifts in this wide earth; there she readily found
protection from the glorious Lord, when she had
most need
of favour from the highest Judge, so that he, the
Lord of creation,
defended her against the greatest terror. The
5 glorious Father in the skies
granted her request, since she always possessed
true faith
in the Almighty. I have heard then that Holofernes
eagerly issued invitations to a feast and provided all
types of
magnificent wonders for the banquets; to it the lord
of men summoned
10 the most experienced retainers. The warriors obeyed
with great haste; they came to the powerful lord and
proceeded to the leader of people. That was the
fourth day
after Judith, prudent in mind,
this woman of elfin beauty first visited him.
They went into the feast to sit down,
15 proud men at the wine-drinking, bold mail-coated
warriors,
all his companions in misfortune. There, along the
benches,
deep bowls were carried frequently; full cups and
pitchers
were also carried to the sitters in the hall. They
received those, doomed to die,

20 brave warriors, though the powerful man did not
expect it,
that terrible lord of heroes. Then Holofernes,
the gold-giving friend of his men, became joyous
from the drinking.
He laughed and grew vociferous, roared and
clamoured,
so that the children of men could hear from far
away,
how the fierce one stormed and yelled;
25 arrogant and excited by mead, he frequently
admonished
the guests that they enjoy themselves well.
So, for the entire day, the wicked one,
the stern dispenser of treasures,
drenched his retainers with wine until they lay
30 unconscious,
the whole of his troop were as drunk as if they had
been struck down in death,
drained of every ability. So, the men's lord
commanded
the guests to be served, until the dark night
approached
the children of men. Then corrupted by evil,
he commanded that the blessed maiden should be
35 hastily fetched
to his bed, adorned with bracelets,
decorated with rings. The retainers quickly did
as their lord, the ruler of warriors,
commanded them. They stepped into the tumult
of the guest-hall where they found the wise Judith,
40 and then quickly
the warriors began to lead the
illustrious maiden to the lofty tent,
where the powerful man Holofernes, hateful to the
Saviour,

rested himself during the night.
45 There was a beautiful
all-golden fly-net² that the commander
had hung around the bed, so that the wicked one,
the lord of warriors, could look through
50 on each of those sons of men who came in there,
but not one of the race of mankind could look
on him, unless, brave man, he commanded one
of his very iniquitous men to come
nearer to him for secret consultation. They quickly
brought to bed
55 the prudent woman. Then the resolute heroes
went to inform their lord that the holy maiden
had been brought into his tent. Then the notorious
one, that lord of cities,
became happy in his mind: he intended to violate
the bright woman with defilement and with sin. The
Judge of glory,
60 the majestic Guardian, the Lord, Ruler of hosts,
would not consent to that,
but he prevented him from that thing. Then the
diabolical one,
the wanton and wicked man, departed
with a troop of his men to find his bed, where he
would lose his life
forthwith within that one night. He had attained his
violent end
65 on earth, just as he had previously deserved,
this severe lord of men, since he had dwelled under
the roof
of clouds in this world. The mighty man then fell into
the middle
of his bed, so drunk with wine that he possessed no
sense
in his mind. The warriors stepped

70 out from that place with great haste,
men sated with wine, who led the traitor,
that hateful tyrant, to bed
for the last time. Then the Saviour's
glorious handmaiden was very mindful
75 of how she could deprive the terrible one
of life most easily, before the impure and
foul one awoke. Then the Creator's maiden,
with her braided locks, took a sharp sword,
a hard weapon in the storms of battle, and drew it
from the sheath
80 with her right hand. She began to call the Guardian
of heaven
by name, the Saviour of all
the inhabitants of earth, and said these words:
"God of creation, Spirit of comfort,
Son of the Almighty, I want to beseech you
85 for your mercy on me in my time of need,
glorious Trinity.³ My heart is intensely
inflamed within me now, and my mind is troubled,
greatly afflicted with sorrows. Give me, Lord of
heaven,
victory and true belief so I might cut down this
bestower of torment
90 with this sword. Grant me my salvation,
mighty Lord of men: I have never had more need
of your mercy than now. Avenge now, mighty Lord,
eminent Bestower of glory, that which is so grievous
in my mind,
so fervent in my heart." Then the highest Judge
inspired her immediately with great zeal, as he does
95 to each
of the dwellers on earth who seek help from him
with reason and with true faith. Then she felt relief
in her mind,

hope was renewed for the holy woman. She seized
the heathen man
securely by his hair, pulled him shamefully towards
her
100 with her hands, and skilfully placed
the wicked and loathsome man
so that she could most easily manage the miserable
one
well. Then, the woman with braided locks struck
the enemy, that hostile one,
105 with the shining sword, so that she cut through half
of his neck, such that he lay unconscious,
drunk and wounded. He was not dead yet,
not entirely lifeless. The courageous woman
struck the heathen hound energetically
110 another time so that his head rolled
forwards on the floor. The foul body lay
behind, dead; the spirit departed elsewhere
under the deep earth and was oppressed there
and fettered in torment forever after,
115 wound round with serpents, bound with
punishments,
cruelly imprisoned in hell-fire
after his departure. Enveloped in darkness,
he had no need at all to hope that he should get out
from
that serpent-hall, but there he must remain
always and forever, henceforth without end,
120 in that dark home deprived of the joy of hope.
Judith had won illustrious glory
in the battle as God, the Lord of heaven,
granted it so when he gave her her victory.
125 Then the prudent woman immediately placed
the warrior's head still bloody
into the sack in which her attendant,

a woman of pale complexion, an excellent
handmaiden,
had brought food for them both; and then Judith
put it, all gory, into the hands of her
130 thoughtful servant to carry home.
Then both the courageous women
went from there straightaway,
until the triumphant women, elated,
got away out from that army
135 so that they could clearly see
the beautiful city walls of Bethulia
glitter. Then, ring-adorned,
they hurried forwards along the path
until, glad at heart, they had reached
140 the rampart gate. Warriors were sitting,
men watching, and keeping guard
in that stronghold, just as Judith the wise maiden
had asked, when she had previously
departed from the sorrowful people,
145 the courageous woman. The beloved woman had
returned again
to the people, and the prudent woman
soon asked one of the men
from the spacious city to come towards her,
and hastily to let them in
150 through the gate of the city-wall; and she spoke
these words
to the victorious people: "I am able to tell you
a memorable thing so that you need no longer
mourn in your minds. The Ruler, the Glory of kings,
is well disposed towards you. It had become
155 revealed
throughout this wide world that glorious and
triumphant success
is approaching and that honour has been granted by
fate to you

because of the afflictions that you have long
suffered."

Then the city-dwellers were joyful
when they heard how the holy one spoke
160 over the high city-wall. The army was joyous
and people hurried to the fortress gate,
men and women, in multitudes and crowds,
groups and troops pressed forward and ran
towards the Lord's maiden in their thousands,
165 old and young. The mind of each one of the people
in that rejoicing city was gladdened
when they perceived that Judith had returned
to her native land; and then hastily
and reverently, they let her in.
170 Then the prudent woman, adorned with gold, asked
her attentive handmaiden
to uncover the warrior's head
and to display it, bloodied, as proof
to the citizens of how she had been helped in battle.
175 Then the noble woman spoke to all the people:
"Victorious heroes, here you can gaze clearly
on the leader of the people, on this head
of the most hateful of heathen warriors,
of the unliving Holofernes,
180 who, among men, inflicted on us the worst torments,
grievous afflictions, and wished to add to these
even more; but God would not grant him
a longer life so that he could plague us
with wrongs. I deprived him of life
185 through God's help. Now I intend to ask
each of the men of these citizens,
each of the warriors, that you immediately
hasten to battle, as soon as the God of creation,
that glorious King, sends his radiant beam of light
190 from the east. Go forward carrying shields,
shields in front of your breasts and corslets,

gleaming helmets, into the troop of enemies;
fell the commanders, those leaders doomed to die
with shining swords. Your enemies
195 are condemned to death, and you will possess glory,
honour in conflict, just as mighty God has
given you that sign by my hand.”
Then a host of brave and keen men prepared quickly
for the battle. Noble warriors and retainers
200 stepped out; they carried triumphant banners;
heroes in helmets went forward to battle
straightaway
from that holy city
at dawn of that same day. Shields clashed,
resounded loudly. The lean wolf rejoiced
205 in the forest, as did the dark raven,
a bloodthirsty bird: they both knew
that the warriors intended to provide them
with a feast from those doomed to die; but behind
them flew
the eagle eager for food, dewy-winged
210 with dark plumage; the horn-beaked bird
sang a battle-song.⁴ The warriors advanced,
men to battle, protected by shields,
hollow wooden shields, those who previously
had suffered the insolence of foreigners,
215 the insult of heathens. In the spear-play,
that was all grievously requited to
the Assyrians, when the Israelites
under their battle-banners had gone
to that camp. Then they boldly
220 let showers of arrows fly forwards,
battle arrows from horned bows,
firm arrows. Angry warriors
roared loudly, sent spears
225 into the midst of the cruel ones. The native heroes

were angry against the hateful race,
resolute, they marched, determined,
they violently aroused their ancient enemies
who were drunk with mead. With their hands,
230 the retainers drew brightly adorned swords from
their sheaths,
excellent sword-edges, zealously killed
the Assyrian warriors,
those evil schemers. They did not spare one
man's life from that army, neither the
lowly nor the powerful whom they could overcome.
235 So, in the morning, the retainers
pursued the foreign people the entire time,
until the chief leaders of that army,
of those who were the enemies, perceived
that the Hebrew men had shown violent sword-
240 brandishing
to them. They went to reveal
all that in words to the most
senior retainers, and they aroused the warriors
and announced fearfully to those drunk with mead
the dreadful news, the morning's terror,
245 the terrible battle. Then, I have heard, immediately
the warriors, doomed to perish, cast off sleep,
and the subdued men thronged in crowds
to the tent of the wicked man,
Holofernes. They intended to announce
250 the battle to their lord at once,
before the terrible force of the Israelites
came down on them. They all supposed
that the leader of the warriors and the bright maiden
were together in that beautiful tent:
255 Judith the noble one, and the licentious one,
terrible and fierce. There was not a single one of the
men
who dared to wake the warrior

or inquire how the warrior
had got on with the holy maiden,
260 the Lord's woman. The armed force of the Israelites
approached; they fought vigorously
with hard swords, violently requited
their ancient grudges, that old conflict,
with shining swords. The Assyrian's
265 glory was destroyed in that day's work,
their pride humbled. Warriors stood
about their lord's tent very uneasy
and sombre in spirit. Then together they all
began to cough, to cry out loudly,
270 to gnash their teeth, suffering grief,
to no avail. Then their glory, success and brave
deeds
were at an end. The men considered how to awaken
their lord; it did them no good.
It got later and later when one of the warriors
275 became bold in that he daringly risked going
into the tent, as need compelled him to.
He found on the bed his pale lord,
lying deprived of spirit,
devoid of life. Immediately, he fell
280 frozen to the floor, and began to tear at his hair
and clothing, wild in mind,
and he spoke these words to the warriors
who were outside, dejected:
"Here our own destruction is made clear,
285 the future signified, that the time of troubles
is pressing near when we shall now lose,
shall perish at the battle together. Here lies our
protector
cut down and beheaded by the sword." Sorrowful,
they
threw their weapons down then, and departed from
290 him weary-spirited

to hasten in flight. The mighty people
fought them from behind, until the greatest part
of the army lay destroyed in battle
on that field of victory, cut down by swords
as a pleasure for the wolves and also as a joy
295 to bloodthirsty birds. Those who still lived fled
from the wooden weapons of their enemies. Behind
them
came the army of the Hebrews, honoured with
victory,
glorified with that judgement. The Lord God, the
almighty Lord,
helped them generously with his aid.
300 Then quickly the valiant heroes
made a war-path through the hateful enemies
with their shining swords; cut down shields,
and penetrated the shield-wall. The Hebrew missile-
throwers
were enraged in the battle,
305 the retainers at that time greatly desired
a battle of spears. There in the sand fell
the greatest part of the total number
of leaders of the Assyrians,
that hateful nation. Few returned
310 alive to their native land. The brave warriors
turned back to retreat among the carnage,
the reeking corpses. There was an opportunity for
the native inhabitants to seize from the most hateful
ancient enemies, the unliving ones,
315 bloody plunder, beautiful ornaments,
shield and broad sword, shining helmets,
precious treasures. The guardians of the country
had gloriously conquered their foes,
the ancient enemy, on that battlefield,
320 executed them with swords. Those who had been
the most hateful of living men while alive

rested in their tracks. Then the entire nation,
the greatest of tribes, the proud braided-haired
ones,
325 for the space of one month carried and led
to the bright city of Bethulia
helmets and hip-swords, grey corslets,
men's armour decorated with gold,
more illustrious treasures than any man
among the wise could say.
330 All of that was earned by the warriors' glory,
bold under the banners and in battle
through the prudent counsel of Judith,
the daring maiden. The brave warriors
brought as her reward from that expedition
335 the sword of Holofernes and his gory helmet,
and likewise his ample mail-coat
adorned with red gold, and everything that the
arrogant
lord of warriors owned by way of treasures or
personal heirlooms,
rings and bright riches; they gave that to the bright
340 and ready-witted woman. For all of this Judith said
thanks to the Lord of hosts, who had given her
honour
and glory in the kingdom of this earth, and also as
her reward in heaven,
the reward of victory in heaven's glory, because she
possessed true faith
in the Almighty. Indeed, at the end she did not doubt
345 in the reward which she had long yearned for. For
that be glory
to the beloved Lord for ever and ever, who created
wind and air,
the heavens and spacious earth, likewise the raging
seas
and joys of heaven through his own individual grace.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is by Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English: An Anthology* (2000).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Book of Judith 10:21: "A mosquito-net of purple interwoven with gold, emerald, and precious stones." Here the "fly-net" is a kind of screen enabling Holofernes to see outside his bed without being seen.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Literally, "threeness" (Old English *drynesse*). In lines 83–84, the heroine prays to the three persons of the Trinity. In the source text, she invokes the "Lord, God of Israel."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See *Beowulf*, lines 3024–27, n. 4 (p. 106).[Return to reference 4](#)

ALFRED 849–899

From the last decade of the eighth century onward, the separate kingdoms of England were subject to repeated attack from Scandinavian raiders. Monasteries at Lindisfarne and Wearmouth-Jarrow (Bede's monastery) were, for example, attacked in 793–94. After 865 these raids developed into a full-scale invasion, which led to the collapse of the principal English kingdoms except Wessex, in the south. Under the rule of King Alfred (871–99), Wessex was itself almost defeated, but by 878 Alfred managed to conclude a treaty with the Danes that established him as ruler of most of England south of the Humber.

Unsatisfied with military stability alone, Alfred set about a cultural and educational reform of what he saw as the weakened state of English learning. Whereas Old English poetry had a long history before Alfred's reign, there was no corresponding tradition of Old English prose. His Preface to the *Pastoral Care* offers the rationale for Alfred's program of prose translations from Latin into Old English, and for the educational reform he planned in order to exploit those translations. For Alfred, the power of a kingdom went hand in hand with the vigor of its learning. He is acutely aware that learning can flourish only "if we have peace," but no less aware that learning will itself sustain that peace; kings in the past, he says, respected wisdom and learning. Through the application of such wisdom they enlarged their authority both at home and abroad.

Apart from foreign invasion, ignorance of languages is, by Alfred's account, the other main enemy of wisdom. For even before the Viking invasions, Alfred remembers a time when the churches throughout England were full of books that too few were capable of reading. Alfred's solution for this decadent state of affairs is, in part, to promote education in both English and Latin literacy. Educational institutions also need teachers and books; accordingly, Alfred imported foreign scholars of high standing, and promoted the production of texts in the English language. While he deeply respected Latin learning, and clearly wanted to promote the understanding of that language, Alfred was not enthralled by its status. In the Preface he ambitiously traces a "translation of studies," by which he marks the movement of learning from Greek to Roman centers, and from there to other European nations, including England. Each nation translates key texts into its own language.

Remarkably, Alfred wanted to present himself—perhaps accurately—as actively engaged in the translation of these works. His biographer Asser tells us that, as a boy, Alfred learned Old English poetry by heart, and that as an adult he learned to read and translate Latin. Alfred commissioned others to translate some works (for example, the translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* and, very possibly, a history of the world by Orosius, as well as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*), but many others are presented as having been translated by Alfred himself: Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, a book of laws, and a prose version of the Psalms.

Taken together, these books offer access to a remarkable range of learning. Many (those by Augustine, Orosius, Boethius, and Gregory) present key, mostly Christian works of late antiquity, originally written between the early fifth and late sixth centuries. *Pastoral Care*, for example, was written by Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), the pope who initiated the missionary project of the Roman Church in Britain; it was designed to instruct bishops ("pastors") in the responsibilities of their office. Just as Roman culture adjusted to Christianity in those centuries, so too did Alfred

introduce the classics of a new Christianity, with many powerful echoes of ancient, pre-Christian Platonic philosophy, to a recently polytheistic England. With the *Ecclesiastical History* translation he may have commissioned, Old English readers could develop a very sharp awareness of England's own recent history. Whether Alfred did himself translate these works we can never know. Certainly many of the additions made to the original source (particularly in the Boethius translation) discuss the pressures of kingship with great insight and personal intensity.

The Preface to the *Pastoral Care* presents us with the image of a king totally committed to, and actively engaged in, learning. Alfred can see the footprints of former lovers of knowledge. With his long memory he is determined not to allow recent forgetfulness and destruction to obscure those traces forever.

Preface to the *Pastoral Care*¹

King Alfred greets Bishop Wærferth² lovingly and with friendship.

And I let it be known to you that it has very often come into my mind what wise men there were formerly throughout England, both in sacred and secular orders; and what happy times were then throughout England; and how the kings who had power over the people in those days obeyed God and His ministers; and how they preserved peace, morality and their authority at home, and at the same time enlarged their territories abroad; and how they prospered both with war and wisdom; and also how zealous the sacred orders were in both teaching and learning, and in all the services which they owed to God; and how foreigners came to this land in search of wisdom and instruction, and how we now must procure them from abroad, if we are to have them.

So general was the decay of learning in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their services in English or translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe that there were not many beyond the Humber! There were so few of them that I cannot remember a single one south of the Thames when I came to the throne. Thanks be to Almighty God that we have any teachers among us now.

Therefore I command you to do as I believe you are willing to do, to disengage yourself from worldly matters as often as you can, that you may apply the wisdom that God has given you wherever you can. Consider what punishments came to us in this world, when we neither loved wisdom ourselves, nor bequeathed it to others; we loved the name only that we were Christians, and very few of the virtues.

When I considered all this, then I remembered also that I saw, before it had been all ravaged and burned, how the churches throughout the whole of England stood filled with treasures and

books, and there was also a great multitude of God's servants. Yet they had very little knowledge of the books, for they could not understand anything of them, because they were not written in their own language. It was as if they had said: "Our predecessors, who formerly held these places, loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and bequeathed it to us. In this we can still see their track, but we cannot follow it." And therefore we have lost both the wealth and the wisdom, because we would not incline our mind to that track.

When I remembered all this, then I very much wondered at the good and wise counsellors who were formerly throughout all England, and who had perfectly absorbed all those books, that they had not wished to translate them into their own language. But I quickly answered myself, and said: "They did not think that men would ever be so careless and that learning would so decay: they deliberately left the task aside, since they wished that the wisdom of this land might increase, the more we knew languages."

Then I considered how the law was first known in Hebrew, and then, when the Greeks had learned it, they translated the whole of it into their own language, along with many other books. And again the Romans, when they had learned it, they translated the whole of sacred letters through learned interpreters into their own language. And also all other Christian nations translated a part of them into their own language.

Therefore it seems better to me, if you agree, that we also translate certain books that are most needful for all people to know into the language which we can all understand, and bring it about, as we very easily can with God's help, if we have the peace, that all the youth of free men now in England—those who have sufficient means that they may apply themselves to it—be set to learning, as long as they are not fit for any other occupation and may not be set to any other use, until they are able to read English writing well. Let those afterwards be taught more in Latin who should be taught further, and who are to be placed in higher orders.

When I remembered how the knowledge of Latin had formerly decayed throughout England, and yet many could read English writing, then I began, among various and manifold obligations of this kingdom, to translate into English that book that is called in Latin *Pastoralis*, and in English *Shepherd's Book*,³ sometimes word for word, and sometimes according to the sense,⁴ as I learned it from Plegmund my archbishop, and from Asser my bishop,⁵ and from Grimbold my mass-priest, and from John my mass-priest. And when I had learned it, as I could best understand it, and as I could most clearly interpret it, I translated it into English; and I will send a copy to every bishopric in my kingdom; and in each is an *æstel*, worth fifty mancuses.⁶ And I command in God's name that no-one take the book mark from the book, nor the book from the cathedral—it being uncertain how long there may be such learned bishops as now, thanks be to God, there are nearly everywhere.

Therefore I intend each book may always remain in the same place, unless the bishop wish to take it with him, or it be lent out anywhere, or anyone be making a copy from it.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation, with alterations, is taken from Albert S. Cook and Chauncey B. Tinker, eds., *Select Translations from Old English Prose* (1908).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Bishop of Worcester (d. ca. 915).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Gregory (ca. 540–604) called his work *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* (Book of Pastoral Rule); *pastor* in Latin means “shepherd.”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The two standard approaches to translation.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Asser, bishop of Sherborne (890s), who wrote a biography of Alfred, *The Life of Alfred*. Plegmund (d. 914 or 923), archbishop of Canterbury.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Coins each equivalent to 30 silver pence. The meaning of *æstel*, a word that appears only here, is unknown; it is

thought to be a book pointer.[Return to reference 6](#)

THE WANDERER

The lament of *The Wanderer* is an excellent example of the elegiac mood so common in Old English poetry. Such poems look back to a time when oral poets performed heroic songs in the meter preserved, practiced, and recorded in original works by their Christian descendants. In celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel, Hrothgar's court poet performs a heroic lay about the Germanic hero Sigemund (lines 883–914). The elegiac tone common to *Beowulf* and these later poems, however, expresses the poets' profound feelings toward their ancestors who lived before St. Augustine brought the "good news" to Kent and initiated the conversion. Nowhere are those feelings expressed more poignantly than in *The Wanderer*.

As is true of most Old English elegiac laments, both the language and the structure of *The Wanderer* are difficult. At the beginning, the speaker (whom the poet identifies as an "earth-treader") voices hope of finding comfort after his many tribulations. After the poet's interruption, the Wanderer continues to speak—to himself—of his long search for a new home, describing how he must keep his thoughts locked within him while he makes that search. But these thoughts form the most vivid and moving part of his soliloquy—how, floating on the sea, dazed with sorrow and fatigue, he imagines that he sees his old companions, and how, as he wakens to reality, they vanish on the water like seabirds. The second part of the poem, beginning "Therefore I don't know why," expands the theme from one man to all human beings in a world wasted by war and time. He

derives such cold comfort as he can from asking the old question,
“Where are they now, who were once so glad in the mead-hall?”

The Wanderer is preserved only in the Exeter Book, a manuscript dating to about 975 (although the poem may be much earlier), which contains the largest surviving collection of Old English poetry.

The Wanderer ¹

“Often the lone-dweller² longs for relief,
the Almighty’s mercy, though melancholy,
his hands turning time and again
the ocean’s currents, the ice-cold seas,
following paths of exile. Fate is firmly set.”
5 So spoke the Wanderer,³ weary of hardships,
cruel combats, the death of kinsmen.
“Often alone, always at daybreak
I must lament my cares; not one remains alive
to whom I could utter the thoughts in my heart,
10 tell him my sorrows. In truth, I know that
for any eorl⁴ an excellent virtue
is to lock tight the treasure chest
within one’s heart, howsoever he may think.
A downcast heart won’t defy destiny,
15 nor the sad spirit give sustenance.
And therefore those who thirst for fame
often bind fast their breast chamber.
“So I must hold in the thoughts of my heart—
though often wretched, bereft of my homeland,
20 far from kinfolk— bind them with fetters,
since in days long past with darkness of earth
I covered my gold-friend,⁵ and I fared from there
over the waves’ bed, winter-weary,
longing for a hall and a lord of rings,
25 where near or far I might find one
in the mead-hall remembering me and my kin,
or else show favor to a friendless man,
requite me with comfort. One acquainted with
pain

30 understands how cruel a traveling companion
sorrow is for someone with few friends at his side.
Exile attends him, not twisted gold rings,
Heart-freezing frost, not fruits of the earth.
He recalls tablemates and treasure distributed,
35 how from the first his friend and lord
helped him to the feast. That happy time is no
more.

"This, indeed, anyone forced to forgo for long
the beloved counsel of his lord knows well.
Often when sorrow and sleep together
40 bind the poor lone-dweller in their embrace,
he dreams he clasps and that he kisses
his liege-lord again, lays head and hands
on the lord's knees as he did long ago,
enjoyed the gift-giving in days gone by.
Then the warrior, friendless, awakens again,
45 sees before him the fallow waves,
seabirds on the water spreading their wings,
snow and hail falling and sleet as well.
Then the heart's wounds grow heavier,
sadness for dear ones. Sorrow returns.
50 Then through his mind pass memories of kinsmen

—
joyfully he greets them, eagerly gazes—
his fellow warriors, the floating spirits,
fade on their way. They fail to bring
much familiar talk —trouble is renewed—
55 for any man who must often send
his weary spirit over the waves' bed.

"Therefore I don't know why my woeful heart
should not wax dark in this wide world
when I look back on the life of eorls,
60 how quickly they quit the mead-hall's floor,
brave young men. So this middle-earth⁶

from day to day dwindles and fails;
therefore no one is wise without his share of
winters
in the world's kingdom. A wise man must be
65 patient,
not too hot of heart nor hasty of speech,
not reluctant to fight nor too reckless,
not too timid nor too glad, not too greedy,
and never eager to commit until he can be sure.
A man should hold back his boast until
70 that time has come when he truly knows
to direct his heart on the right path.
 "A wise man must know the misery of that time
when the world's wealth shall all stand waste,
just as in our own day all over middle-earth
75 walls are standing wind-swept and wasted,
downed by frost, and dwellings covered with
snow.
The mead-hall crumbles, its master lies dead,
bereft of pleasures, all the warrior-band⁷ perished,
boldly by the wall. Battle took some,
80 bore them away; a bird carried one
above the high waves; the gray wolf took another,
divided him with death; dreary-spirited
an eorl buried another in an earthen pit.
 "Mankind's Creator laid waste this middle-earth
85 till the clamor of city-dwellers ceased to be heard
and ancient works of giants stood empty.
He who wisely contemplates this wall-stead,
and considers deeply the darkness of this life,
mature in years, remembers many
90 bloody battlegrounds and so begins:
 'Where did the steed go? Where the young
warrior? Where the treasure-giver?

Where the seats of fellowship? Where the hall's
 festivity?
 Alas bright beaker! Alas burnished warrior!
 Alas pride of princes! How the time has passed,
 95 gone under night-helm as if it never was!
 A towering wall, traced with serpent shapes,⁸
 endures instead of the dear warrior-band.
 Strength of ash-spears destroyed warriors,
 100 slaughter-greedy weapons, overwhelming fate,
 and storms beat against these stone-faced cliffs,
 snow descending seals up the ground,
 drumming of winter when darkness falls,
 night shadows darken, from the north send down
 fierce hail-showers in hatred of men.
 105 All is wretchedness in the realm of earth;
 fate's work lays low the world under heaven.
 Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting,
 here family is fleeting, here humankind is fleeting.
 All this resting-place Earth shall become empty.' "
 110 So said the wise man as he sat in meditation.
 A good man holds his words back, tells his woes
 not too soon,
 baring his inner heart before knowing the best
 way,
 an eorl who acts with courage. All shall be well for
 him who seeks grace,
 help from our Father in heaven where a fortress
 115 stands for us all.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope, revised by R. D. Fulk (2000). The translation is also indebted to comments by Professor Fulk. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Old English *an-haga* = one + hedge, enclosure—that is, one who dwells alone in some sort of confinement.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Old English *eard-stapa* = earth + treader. The modern title—there is no title in the manuscript—derives from this compound noun.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *Eorl* = warrior. Only later did the Old English word come to designate a member of the British nobility.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Old English *gold-wine* = gold-friend, one of the many formulas applied to the lord, here in his role as dispenser of treasure to his retainers.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The world, viewed as an intermediate region between heaven and hell.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Old English *duguth* = generally something that affords benefit or advantage, but here it specifically applies to a band of warriors.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The reference is to a kind of serpentine ornamentation; examples from Roman times survive in Britain.[Return to reference 8](#)

WULF AND EADWACER

The first three lines of this lyric poem consist of three grammatically coherent sentences, and yet they paint no coherent narrative situation. The reader is forced to infer that situation from the juxtaposition of sentences: thus the gap of narrative sense between the first and second sentences asks the reader to supply a narrative. But what is that narrative? One might infer that the speaker's people and the male to whom the speaker refers are mutually hostile, and that if "he" comes to where the speaker is, he will be easily defeated. One might also assume that there is some special relation between that male and the speaker ("We are apart"). The fourth line might confirm the assumption that the special male is physically absent, and it appears to supply a proper name for him ("Wulf").

Each of these inferences is vulnerable, but the reader is impelled to make assumptions of this kind. The remaining twenty lines prompt many further conjectures. Faced with the vulnerability of those assumptions, we might respond variously. We might dismiss this poem as maddeningly incoherent, inviting us as it does to construct a narrative but refusing to supply the needed connectives. Or we might keep testing hypotheses, working from fundamental elements of narrative (for example, he/I; here/there; now/then). Or we might step back from the enticing puzzles of the poem's texture to think about what kind of poem this is.

Wulf and Eadwacer (an editorial title) appears in the Exeter Book (ca. 975), along with (though not precisely grouped with) all the other so-called Old English elegies, such as *The Wanderer*. Many of

these poems are narrated by a first-person narrator who suffers from temporal and physical dislocations. They are relatively short. They tend to suggest, without filling in, a narrative context. Sometimes the experience of worldly pain invites general reflection on the inevitable treacheries of earthly experience.

This poem, like only one other in this group, is voiced by a woman. We learn this for sure only in line 10 (through an adjectival ending). That fact also helps us to set the text in a larger tradition of usually feminine elegy, a genre exemplified especially by Ovid's *Heroides* (*Heroines*). Classical elegy gives voice to the victim of history—often a woman—whose suffering predominates when society demands her sacrifice, and whose suffering is so intense that it overrides any commitment to narrative. The fragmented, incoherently expressed *implied* narrative is part of the poem's point: it sharpens and concentrates the poignancy of the poem's painful expression. This is the voice of a vast tradition of European lyric love poetry, with both male and female narrators.

That understanding of genre accounts for the kind of puzzles we have already encountered. It also accounts for the way in which the pained voice in the present breaks forth over narration of the past ("Wulf, my Wulf"). But the puzzles remain: Is Wulf the narrator's husband or lover? Is the name "Wulf" (a possible proper name, but also a figure for the outlaw) conceptually symmetrical with "Eadwacer" (literally "property watcher"), thus designating the same male? Is the name "Eadwacer" used ironically with regard to the absent, outlawed "Wulf," given that the child of the couple's union is threatened by a literal wolf?

We can never know the answers to these questions, but neither, by the conventions of this genre, are we supposed to. What we do know for sure is that the shared song of this couple is joined painfully only through the longing caused by separation.

Wulf and Eadwacer¹

It is as though my people have been given
A present. They wish to capture him
If he comes with a troop. We are apart.
Wulf is on one isle, I am on another.
Fast is that island set among the fens.
5 Murderous are the people who inhabit
That island. They will wish to capture him
If he comes with a troop. We are apart.
Grieved have I for my Wulf with distant longings.
Then was it rainy weather, and I sad,
10 When the bold warrior laid his arms about me.
I took delight in that and also pain.
O Wulf, my Wulf, my longing for your coming
Has made me ill, the rareness of your visits,
My grieving spirit, not the lack of food.
15 Eadwacer, do you hear me? For a wolf
Shall carry to the woods our wretched whelp.
Men very easily may put asunder
That which was never joined, our song together.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is by Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970). [Return to reference 1](#)

THE WIFE'S LAMENT

In modern English translation, the speaker of this poem sounds much like the speaker in *The Wanderer*, lamenting his exile, his isolation, and the loss of his lord. But in Old English the grammatical gender of the pronouns reveals that this speaker is a woman; the man she refers to as "my lord" must, therefore, be her husband. The story behind the lament remains obscure. All that can be made out for certain is that the speaker was married to a nobleman of another country; that her husband has left her (possibly forced into exile as a result of a feud); that his kinsmen are hostile to her; and that she is now living alone in a wilderness. Although the circumstances are shadowy, it is reasonable to conjecture that the wife may have been a "peace-weaver" (a woman married off to make peace between warring tribes), like Hildeburh and Freawaru, whose politically inspired marriages result only in further bloodshed (see *Beowulf*, pp. 64 and 85). The obscurity of the Old English text has led to diametrically opposed interpretations of the husband's feeling toward his wife. One interpretation holds that, for unexplained reasons, possibly because of his kinsmen's hostility to her, he has turned against her. The other, which is adopted in this translation, is that, in her mind at least, they share the suffering of his exile and their separation. Thus in the line here rendered "I must suffer the feud of my much-beloved," *fæhðu* (feud) is read by some as the technical term for a blood feud—the way it is used in *Beowulf* when Hrothgar says he settled a great feud started by Beowulf's father with *feo* (fee)—that is, monetary compensation (p. 52). Others take the word

in a more general sense as referring to the man's enmity toward his wife. In either case, the woman's themes and language resemble those of male "wraeccas" (outcasts or exiles; the Old English root survives in modern *wretch*, *wretched*, and *wrack*) in the Old English poems called "elegies" because of their elegiac content and mood.

The Wife's Lament¹

Full of sorrow, I shall make this song
about me, my own fate. Surely I can tell
what sufferings I endured since I came of age,
both the new and old, never more than now.
I must endure without end the misery of exile.
5 First my lord² departed from his people
over tossing waves; I worried when day came
in what land my liege-lord could be.
Then I set out, a friendless exile,
to seek a place for my sore need.
10 My husband's kin had hatched a plot,
conspiring secretly to separate us,
so that we³ widest apart in the world's realms
lived in most misery, and I languished.
My lord commanded me to keep house here;
15 in this dwelling-place; I had few dear ones,
devoted friends. Therefore I feel downcast.
Then I learned my lord was like myself—
down on his luck, dreary-spirited,
secretly minding murder in his heart.
20 A happy pair we had promised each other,
that death alone would ever divide us,
and nothing else. All that is changed;
our nearness once is now as though
it never had been. Now, far or near, I must
25 bear the malice of the man I loved.
I was told to live in a grove of trees,
under an oak in an earthen cave.
That earth-hall is old; yearning overcomes me.
30 These dales are dark and the dunes high,

bitter bulwarks overgrown with briers,
a joyless place. Here my lord's departure
afflicts me cruelly. Friends here on earth,
lovers lying together, lounge in bed,
while at daybreak I abandon
35 this earthen-pit under the oak
to sit alone the summer-long day.
There I may bewail my many woes,
suffering of exile, for I can never
obtain comfort for all my cares
40 nor all the longing this life brought me.
If ever anyone should feel anguish,
harsh pain at heart, she⁴ should put on
a happy appearance while enduring
endless sorrows— should she possess
45 all the world's bliss, or be banished far away
from her homeland. I believe my lord sits
by a stony storm-beaten cliff,
that water-tossed my weary friend
sits in a desolate home. He must suffer
50 much in his mind, remembering too often
a happier place. Woe unto him
who languishing waits for a loved one.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope and revised by R. D. Fulk (2000). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A woman would refer to her husband as her "lord." [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Old English *wit*, an example of the dual form, used for two persons. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Old English *geong-man*. The identity of the speaker has been debated, but most recent opinion holds it to be the wife

herself, speaking impersonally. The translation takes the liberty of using “she” in reference to the speaker.[Return to reference 4](#)

THE RUIN

The power of enduring yet decaying architecture is characteristic of post-imperial cultures. The imperialists may have left (as the Romans did when they quit Britain in 410), but their buildings remain for centuries, serving as figures for the fall of earthly kingdoms. Old English poets certainly admired things bound fast. Stable architecture is almost the last thing upon which the dying Beowulf looks: he beholds “those gigantic stones . . . how the earthwork / was braced with arches built over columns” (lines 2718–19). Some buildings constructed by Germanic kings are provisionally capable of resisting the ravages of time for a few generations (for example, Hrothgar’s Heorot in *Beowulf*, lines 770–74), but only the Roman buildings inspire awe for their capacity to endure for centuries, to evoke memories of the glory of what has been almost entirely lost from mind, and for the fact that they, too, are finally subject to the destructive effects of what speakers of Old English called “wyrd,” or fate (the ancestor of our word *weird*). *The Ruin*, though itself damaged in the Exeter Book (ca. 975), expresses awe, admiration, and grief as it surveys what seems almost certainly a Roman building for hot baths.

The Ruin¹

Splendid this rampart is, though fate destroyed it,
The city buildings fell apart, the works
Of giants crumble. Tumbled are the towers,
Ruined the roofs, and broken the barred gate,
5 Frost in the plaster, all the ceilings gape,
Torn and collapsed and eaten up by age.
And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace
Of earth, the dead departed master-builders,
Until a hundred generations now
10 Of people have passed by. Often this wall
Stained red and grey with lichen has stood by
Surviving storms while kingdoms rose and fell.
And now the high curved wall itself has fallen.
... ²

20 The heart inspired, incited to swift action.
Resolute masons, skilled in rounded building
Wondrously linked the framework with iron bonds.
The public halls were bright, with lofty gables,
Bath-houses many; great the cheerful noise,
And many mead-halls filled with human pleasures.
25 Till mighty fate brought change upon it all.
Slaughter was widespread, pestilence was rife,
And death took all those valiant men away.
The martial halls became deserted places,
The city crumbled, its repairers fell,
30 Its armies to the earth. And so these halls
Are empty, and this red curved roof now sheds
Its tiles, decay has brought it to the ground,
Smashed it to piles of rubble, where long since
A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned,

35 Gleaming in splendor, proud and flushed with wine,
Shone in their armor, gazed on gems and treasure,
On silver, riches, wealth, and jewelry,
On this bright city with its wide domains.
40 Stone buildings stood, and the hot steam cast forth
Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed
In its bright compass, where convenient
Stood hot baths ready for them at the centre.
Hot streams poured forth over the clear grey stone,
45 To the round pool and down into the baths.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is from Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Six lines are illegible here in the manuscript.[Return to reference 2](#)

RIDDLES

"*Saga hwæt ic hatte*" ("Say what I am called") is a frequently repeated imperative in the corpus of Old English riddles. The Exeter Book (ca. 975) contains not only moving elegiac poems, such as *The Wanderer* ([pp. 121–24](#)), *The Wife's Lament* ([pp. 126–28](#)), and *Wulf and Eadwacer* ([pp. 124–26](#)), but also a striking collection of ninety or so riddles. Like the elegies, the riddles are conveyed by first-person narrators, and, also like the elegies, they refuse to disclose the full conditions of their utterance. Whereas that refusal produces an emotional charge in the elegies, in the riddles it produces an intriguing and cognitive challenge.

The Old English riddles are clearly related to a learned Latin tradition of enigmas (*aenigmata*). Even if their subject matter is derived from the empirical world of natural phenomena, of everyday objects and animals, they provoke subtle interpretive challenges that defamiliarize the everyday environment. When a poem fails to supply the crucial term of recognition ("what I am") around which understanding rapidly organizes perception, then every feature of the familiar becomes suddenly fascinating. Outworn metaphors spring into rich conceptual life; that which is regarded as purely conceptual is returned to its material condition; the everyday event becomes a wonder; comedy leaps unexpectedly forth from a revitalized account of the humdrum. Things and creatures disclose their mysterious and layered life in the world.

The Riddles¹

Riddle 1

My beak points downwards, and I travel low
And dig along the ground, move forward as
The wood's old foe propels me; and my lord
And guardian walks stooping at my tail,
Pushes and moves and drives me on the field,
5 Sows in my track. I sniff along the ground,
Brought from the forest, firmly bound, and borne
Upon the wagon; I have many wonders.
And as I move on one side there is green
And my clear track is dark upon the other.
10 A well-made point is driven through my back
And hangs beneath, and through my head another,
Firm, pointing forwards; what my teeth tear up
Falls down beside me, if he serves me well
Who, as my lord, controls me from behind.²
15

Riddle 2

Some enemy deprived me of my life
And took away my worldly strength, then wet me,
Dipped me in water, took me out again,
Set me in sunshine, where I quickly lost
The hairs I had. Later the knife's hard edge
5 Cut me with all impurities ground off.
Then fingers folded me; the bird's fine raiment
Traced often over me with useful drops
Across my brown domain, swallowed the tree-dye
Mixed up with water, stepped on me again

10 Leaving dark tracks. The hero clothed me then
With boards to guard me, stretched hide over me,
Decked me with gold; and thus the splendid work
Of smiths, with wire bound round, embellished me.
15 Now my red dye and all my decorations,
My gorgeous trappings far and wide proclaim
The Lord of Hosts, not grief for foolish sins.
If sons of men will make good use of me,
By that they shall be sounder, more victorious,
20 Their hearts more bold, their minds more full of joy,
Their spirits wiser; they shall have more friends,
Dear ones and kinsmen, truer and more good,
More kind and faithful, who will add more glory
And happiness by favors, who will lay
25 Upon them kindnesses and benefits,
And clasp them fast in the embrace of love.
Say who I am, useful to men. My name
Is famous, good to men, and also sacred.³

Riddle 3

A moth ate words; a marvelous event
I thought it when I heard about that wonder,
A worm had swallowed some man's lay,^o a thief
In darkness had consumed the mighty saying
5 With its foundation firm. The thief was not
One whit the wiser when he ate those words.⁴

Endnotes

- Note 1: Translations are from Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Solution: plow.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Solution: the Bible.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Solution: bookworm.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *poem* [Return to reference °](#)

WULFSTAN OF YORK

d. 1023

In 1014 England was under severe pressure: the year of the millennium after the death of Christ was approaching, when the Antichrist was due to arrive, with attendant havoc; and English overlordship of England was under what looked like terminal threat, after a Danish king took the throne in December 1013. Wulfstan, archbishop of York, responded to the pressure with a fierce, not to say pyrotechnic sermon, *Wolf's Sermon to the English*.

Bishop Wulfstan was successively bishop of London and then bishop of Worcester and archbishop of York; from 1016 on, he was archbishop of York alone. In addition to his demonstrable production of sermons in Latin (four) and, more often, Old English (twenty-two), in a very distinctive style, Wulfstan collaborated in the formulation of legal codes for both Aethelred the Unready (ruled England 978–1013, 1014–16) and Cnut (ruled 1016–35).

That Wulfstan served both an English and a Danish king bespeaks the political and military instability of the England in which he lived. Alfred had stabilized Danish incursions into England with the treaty of Wedmore in 878, but Scandinavian invasions recurred from the mid-tenth century; by 1013 a Danish king, Sweyn, was on the throne of England. After Sweyn died in 1014, the English king Aethelred returned for just two years. Aethelred was succeeded very briefly by his son Edmund Ironside (d. 1016), after whom the Danish Cnut, Sweyn's son, became king of England. *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*

was written and delivered in this period of general Danish overlordship of England—certainly after the expulsion of King Aethelred in late 1013, and likely in the two-year interval between the Danish kings Sweyn and Cnut (the sermon's later heading gives 1014 as its date).

In Wolf's *Sermon to the English* Wulfstan, indifferent to the potential contradiction, inserts fierce moral excoriation of the English into an apocalyptic sermon. The vigorous critique aims to produce moral improvement in the face of Danish attack, while the apocalyptic emphasis stresses the world's inevitable deterioration as it nears its end (the Christian world was about to pass its first millennium after the death of Christ, which according to Revelation 20:1–3 would herald the arrival of the Antichrist). Wulfstan's predicament as archbishop is all the more dire since the largely successful enemies of the Christian English are polytheists.

In addition to the apocalyptic and penitential emphases of the sermon, Wulfstan adds a third, specifically historical parallel to the condition of early eleventh-century England. He ends his sermon by making foreboding reference to the sixth-century British historian Gildas (d. ca. 570), whose *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (Concerning the Overthrow and Conquest of Britain) relates the last time an entire people in Britain was overcome by foreign invasion—that is, the invasion of the Britons by the Saxons.

Noted as a stylist in both Latin and English, Wulfstan's playful nom de plume is the Latin for wolf, *lupus*, which picks up on the first element of his name Wulfstan (literally, "wolf stone"). A bishop is supposed to be a "pastor," a shepherd protecting his flock from wolves; Wulfstan is not so meek and protective. Accordingly, he deploys sharp and biting stylistic devices designed to capture the attention and excite the shame of his listening public: he relies on two-stress phrases, drawn from the basic metrical units of Old English poetry, which sometimes rhyme and frequently alliterate, and he builds to powerful climaxes that encourage penitence.

To hear both these features, consider the following passage:
"And us stalu and cwalu, stric and steorfa, orfcwealm and uncoðu,

hol and hete and rypera reaflac derede swyðe þearle, and us ungylda swyðe gedrehtan, and us unwedera foroft weoldan unwæstma" (Theft and murder, sedition and pestilence, plague among livestock and disease, malice and hatred, and the plundering of thieves have inflicted untold damage, and excessive taxation has oppressed us, while storms have often provoked crop failures). Phrases commonly have two stresses and alliterate (for example, "hol and hete"), while the syntax of the sentence is shaped by a triplet of coordinate clauses each beginning "And us": the first, the longest, is followed by two structurally similar sequences (subject–verb–adverb), sharper and shorter.

The sermon was a form of verbal art across the entire medieval period and well beyond. Unlike Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, Wulfstan's sermon does not prompt reflection on the moral quality of its speaker: it leaps out to grab the attention of an audience confronting perilous times.

Wolf's Sermon to the English¹

Beloved men, know the truth: this world is in haste and it approaches the end.

And so the longer things go in this world, the worse they get. It must necessarily be the case, therefore, on account of the people's sinfulness, that our predicament will badly deteriorate before the arrival of Antichrist. It will indeed be awful and grim widely throughout the world. Understand well, further, that the Devil has now beguiled this people for many years, and that little trust has survived among men, even if they spoke well, and too much injustice prevailed in the land. There were never many who pondered a remedy as intently as was necessary, but people daily augmented evils, one upon another; they inflicted injustices all too widely throughout this land. We have also therefore endured many injuries and insults. If we shall receive any cure, we must earn it better from God than we have done so far, for with full deserving have we merited the misery that has befallen us. With intense efforts must we procure the remedy from God, if henceforth things should improve.

After all, we know all too well that for a great breach of law a great remedy is needful, just as much water is needed to quench a great fire. From now on each man must scrupulously attend to God's law and pay God His due with probity. Among the infidels, people dare not withhold anything at all from what is due for the worshipping of the false gods; yet we everywhere withhold what is due to God all too often. And among the heathen peoples, people do not dare diminish in any respect what is brought and offered as sacrifice to the false gods, whereas we have cleanly stripped God's house within and without.² Among us, God's servants are almost everywhere deprived of both respect and protection. Among the heathens, no one dares maltreat the ministers of the false gods in

any way, as frequently occurs to the servants of God; Christians should observe the law of God and protect his ministers.

I am declaring the truth: a remedy is needful, because the due observances of God have waned everywhere for too long among this people. Laws among the people have decayed; places of sanctuary have generally become lawless; houses of God have been entirely deprived of established rights, and stripped within of all that is seemly. Widows are widely forced into marriage, and too many impoverished and painfully humiliated. The poor, wholly innocent of any wrongdoing, are cruelly betrayed, ruthlessly enslaved and frequently sold into slavery under the control of foreigners.³ Through pitiless injustice, very young children are widely enslaved on account of minor theft throughout this land. The rights of freemen are annulled, and those of slaves reduced; the right to alms diminished. And, in essence, the laws of God are hated and his teachings despised. Thus through God's anger we are all often shamed, be it known by whomsoever may. Whatever one might think to the contrary, the loss will fall upon all of us in this land, unless God shield us.

It is, accordingly, perfectly plain that we have more frequently transgressed than made amends, and many things are therefore assailing this land. Nothing has prospered for a long time, at home or abroad, but we have often experienced invasion and hunger, burning and bloodshed, in almost each corner of our land. Theft and murder, sedition and pestilence, plague among livestock and disease, malice and hatred, and the plundering of thieves have inflicted untold damage, and excessive taxation has oppressed us, while storms have often provoked crop failures.

For in this land there was, whoever thinks about it, many injustices and fragile loyalties among men. Kin did not protect kin any more than strangers, nor a father his children, nor, sometimes a child his own father, nor one brother another. No one has governed his life as he ought, neither those in holy orders following a rule, nor those in the active life following the law. All too frequently lust has been our law, such that we have observed neither doctrine, both

divine and human, nor law. No one held faith with others as they should, but each person instead betrayed and inflicted harm upon others in word and deed. Indeed, each cuts others down with shameful attacks, and would do more thus if they could.

For in this land huge betrayals have occurred with regard both to God and the world, with much treachery to lords in various manners. Indeed, the greatest betrayal on earth is when a man betrays the soul of his lord. An exemplary instance of lord-betrayal is when a man should plot against his lord's life, or drive him living from the land. Yet both have occurred in this land: men plotted against Edward, and afterward killed and burned him.⁴ And people widely killed godparents and children throughout this land; and all too many holy places have been destroyed on account of illicit promotions, which would not have happened had men shown respect for God's sanctuary. And men sold too many Christians out of this land for a long time, all of which is hateful to God, let anyone believe it who will.

It is shameful to speak of what has occurred too frequently, and terrible to know what those who have committed the following crime do: they pool resources and buy one woman together, and practice filth with her, one after another, and each after the other, like dogs who disregard filthy acts. They then sell that creature of God, whom he redeemed so dearly, into the power of enemies.

We also know where the crime occurred of a father selling his son, a son his mother, and one brother another into the power of enemies. These are dreadful and horrifying events, whoever should consider them. Yet what is damaging this nation is even greater and more various. Many betray their oaths and perjure themselves; pledges are repeatedly broken. Whoever reflects on the matter can see that God's anger is fiercely aroused against this people.

Alas, how might it be that greater shame should befall us through divine anger, on account of our own sins? If a slave should escape his lord and take refuge among the Vikings, and it happen thereafter that the slave should kill the lord in a violent encounter, the lord's kin will remain unrecompensed.⁵ And if the lord should kill

the slave whom he bought previously, he must pay the price of a lord. Ignoble laws and shameful forced payments are now common through God's anger, understand it if you will.

And many disasters have often befallen this people. Nothing has gone well within or without for a long time; invasion and violence have often occurred, everywhere. The English have been entirely without victory and despondent in the face of God's anger. With divine permission, the Vikings are so strong that one of them will often drive ten of us away in an encounter, sometimes more, sometimes less, all on account of our sins. And often ten or twelve, one after the other, disgracefully treat the wife of a nobleman, or his daughter or kinswoman, there where he, who considered himself proud and powerful before that happened, looks on. A slave will often bind him fast who was previously his lord, and make him his slave, through God's anger. Woe for the misery, woe for the shame that the English now endure on account of divine ire.

Two or three Vikings often drive a band of Christians out from among this people, from sea to sea, huddled together, in shame of us all, if we were to understand the magnitude of the event accurately. And yet we repay the humiliation that we suffer with honor to those who inflict the shame upon us. We pay them off continually, while they humiliate us daily; they ravage and burn, steal and rob, taking everything to their ships. What else than God's fury is evidently seen in all these events?

We pay them continually and they humiliate us daily; they ravage and they burn, plunder and rob and carry to the ship; and lo! what else is there clear and evident in all these happenings except God's anger toward this nation?⁶

* * *

Alas, many might easily recall in addition more than a single person could readily consider, how miserably things have gone for a long time throughout this land. Let each man indeed reflect intently on his own behavior, and not delay to so do for too long. In God's

name, may we do as is necessary: we must protect ourselves as we most readily may, unless we are all to perish together.

In the time of the Britons, there was a scholar named Gildas⁷ who wrote about their sins, and how they with their transgressions so excessively angered God, until he finally permitted the army of the English⁸ to occupy their land, and completely to annihilate the British host. According to Gildas, this happened through the plunder of the rich, and through their covetousness for ill-gotten gains, and through the lawlessness of the people, through corrupt judgments, through the idleness of bishops, and through the disgraceful cowardice of priests, who all too often fell silent instead of declaring the truth, and who stayed mum when they should have opened their mouths. Through the foul pride of the people and their gluttony and manifold sins they lost their land and they perished themselves.

Let's do what we must, and take warning from these events. What I say is true: that we know of worse things done by the English than we have heard of done by the Britons. It is therefore imperative that we reflect upon ourselves and seek to enlist God's help. Let's do what is necessary: turn to righteousness and at least partly abandon sinfulness, and to repair what we formerly broke. May we love God and follow his laws, and perform what we promised we would when we received our baptism, or what they promised who spoke for us at our baptism. Let us compose our words and deeds with justice, eagerly purify our conscience, and preserve our oaths and pledges, and maintain some sincere loyalty among us. Let us often reflect upon the mighty judgment by which we will all be judged, and shield ourselves against the surging fire of infernal punishment and earn for ourselves the glories and the joys that God has prepared for those who work his will on earth.

May God help us. Amen.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text of Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi* exists in three forms. The text here is translated by James Simpson from the version

in *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (1957).[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Possibly a caustic reference to the protection money, known as “Danegeld,” paid to Viking invaders.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Slavery did exist in early medieval England, following the Roman occupation and withdrawal. A late 7th-century law code, repeated in late 10th-century codes, forbade the sale of slaves abroad. Slavery declined steeply in England after the Norman Conquest and disappeared after 1200; English slave trading resumes only in early modernity, in the mid-16th century.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: King Edward (ca. 962–978), son of King Edgar (ruled 959–75), was murdered in 978 and was succeeded by his half-brother Aethelred the Unready.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A reference to the legal system of “wergild,” whereby payments are made to resolve legal disputes, especially murder. The level of payment is determined by the social standing of the injured or slain party.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The following recapitulative section is omitted.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: British monk and historian (d. 570?), author of the Latin work *Concerning the Overthrow and Conquest of Britain*.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, the Angles.[Return to reference 8](#)

EARLY IRISH LYRICS

Monastic Irish scribes were also composers of beautiful lyrics, inspired by both the study and what could be seen from the study.

The Scholar and His Cat^{*}

I and white Pangur practice each of us his special art: his mind is set on hunting, my mind on my special craft.

I love (it is better than all fame) to be quiet beside my book, diligently pursuing knowledge. White Pangur does not envy me: he loves his childish craft.

When the two of us (this tale never wearies us) are alone together in our house, we have something to which we may apply our skill, an endless sport.

It is usual, at times, for a mouse to stick in his net, as a result of warlike battlings. For my part, into my net falls some difficult rule of hard meaning.

He directs his bright perfect eye against an enclosing wall. Though my clear eye is very weak I direct it against keenness of knowledge.

He is joyful with swift movement when a mouse sticks in his sharp paw. I too am joyful when I understand a dearly loved difficult problem.

Though we be thus at any time, neither of us hinders the other: each of us likes his craft, severally rejoicing in them.

He it is who is master for himself of the work which he does every day. I can perform my own work directed at understanding clearly what is difficult.

Endnotes

- Note *: This and the following lyrics are translated by Gerard Murphy in his *Early Irish Lyrics* (1998). [Return to reference *](#)

The Scribe in the Woods

A hedge of trees overlooks me; a blackbird's lay¹
sings to me (an announcement which I shall not
conceal); above my lined book the birds' chanting
sings to me.

A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance)
in a grey cloak from bush fortresses. The Lord is
indeed good to me: well do I write beneath a forest
of woodland.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Poem, song. [Return to reference 1](#)

The Lord of Creation

Let us adore the Lord, maker of wondrous works,
great bright Heaven with its angels, the white-waved
sea on earth.

My Hand Is Weary with Writing

My hand is weary with writing; my sharp great point
is not thick; my slender-beaked pen juts forth a
beetle-hued draft of bright blue ink.

A steady stream of wisdom springs from my well-
colored neat fair hand; on the page it pours its draft
of ink of the green-skinned holly.

I send my little dripping pen unceasingly over an
assemblage of books of great beauty, to enrich the
possessions of men of art—whence my hand is
weary with writing.

Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

THE ANGEVIN EMPIRE, ca. 1190

MILES 0 50 100 150 200
KILOMETERS 0 75 150 225 300



THE MYTH OF ARTHUR'S RETURN

During the twelfth century, three authors, writing in Latin, Anglo-Norman French, and Middle English respectively, created a mostly legendary history of Britain for their Norman overlords (see [p. 14](#)). This “history” was set in the remote past, beginning with a foundation myth—a heroic account of national origins—modeled on Virgil’s *Aeneid* and ending with the Germanic conquest of the native islanders, the Britons, in the fifth and sixth centuries. The chief architect of the history is Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was writing his *History of the Kings of Britain* in Latin prose ca. 1136–38. His work was freely translated into French verse by Wace in 1155, and Wace in turn was translated into English alliterative poetry by Layamon in his *Brut* (ca. 1190).

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace wrote their histories of Britain primarily for an audience of noblemen and prelates who were descendants of the Norman conquerors of England. Geoffrey wrote several dedications of his *History*, first to supporters of Matilda, the heiress presumptive of Henry I, and, when the Crown went instead to Stephen of Blois, to the new king’s allies and to Stephen himself. Layamon tells us that Wace wrote his French version for Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen of Stephen’s successor, Henry II. The prestige and power of ancient Rome still dominated the historical and political imagination of the feudal aristocracy, and the legendary history of the ancient kings of the Britons, especially of King Arthur, who had defeated Rome itself, served to flatter the self-image and ambitions of the Anglo-Norman barons. Geoffrey’s *History of the Kings of*

Britain addressed many of the predicaments faced by kings of England, who were also overlords of large parts of western France. Between 1154 and 1214, indeed, English kings were lords of what was effectively an empire, including parts of Ireland and Wales, and all of western France (see map of the so-called Angevin Empire, so named because Henry II, who ruled 1154–89, was count of Anjou). The finally tragic arc of Arthurian narrative in particular highlights the interrelated challenges of both national and imperial governance.

Folklore and literature provide examples of a recurrent myth about a leader or hero who has not really died but is asleep somewhere or in some state of suspended life and will return to save his people. Evidently, the Bretons and Welsh developed this myth about Arthur in oral tradition long before it turns up in medieval chronicles. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon, and subsequent writers about Arthur, including Malory (see [pp. 603–22](#)), allude to it with varying degrees of skepticism.

The selections from Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace are translated by Alfred David. The Layamon selection is translated by Rosamund Allen.

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH: *From The History of the Kings of Britain*

But also the famous King Arthur himself was mortally wounded. When he was carried off to the island of Avalon to have his wounds treated, he bestowed the crown on his cousin Constantine, the son of Duke Cador in the year 542 after the Incarnation of our lord. May his soul rest in peace.

WACE: *From Roman de Brut*

Arthur, if the story is not false, was mortally wounded; he had himself carried to Avalon to be healed of his wounds. He is still there and the Britons expect him as they say and hope. He'll come from there if he is still alive. Master Wace, who made this book, won't say more about Arthur's end than the prophet Merlin rightly said once upon a time that one would not know whether or not he were dead. The prophet spoke truly: ever since men have asked and shall always ask, I believe, whether he is dead or alive. Truly he had himself taken to Avalon 542 years after the Incarnation. It was a pity that he had no offspring. He left his realm to Constantine, the son of Cadour of Cornwall, and asked him to reign until his return.

LAYAMON: *From Brut*

Arthur was mortally wounded, grievously badly;
To him there came a young lad who was from his
clan,
He was Cador the Earl of Cornwall's son;
The boy was called Constantine; the king loved him
very much.
14270 Arthur gazed up at him, as he lay there on the
ground,
And uttered these words with a sorrowing heart:
"Welcome, Constantine; you were Cador's son;
Here I bequeath to you all of my kingdom,
And guard well my Britons all the days of your life
And retain for them all the laws which have been
14275 extant in my days
And all the good laws which there were in Uther's
days.
And I shall voyage to Avalon, to the fairest of all
maidens,
To the Queen Argante, a very radiant elf,
And she will make quite sound every one of my
wounds,
14280 Will make me completely whole with her health-
giving potions.
And then I shall come back to my own kingdom
And dwell among the Britons with surpassing
delight."
After these words there came gliding from the sea
What seemed a short boat, moving, propelled along
by the tide
14285 And in it were two women in remarkable attire,

Who took Arthur up at once and immediately carried
him

And gently laid him down and began to move off.

And so it had happened, as Merlin said before:

That the grief would be incalculable at the passing of
Arthur.

14290 The Britons even now believe that he is alive
And living in Avalon with the fairest of the elf-folk,
And the Britons are still always looking for when
Arthur comes returning.

Yet once there was a prophet and his name was
Merlin:

He spoke his predictions, and his sayings were the
truth,

14295 Of how an Arthur once again would come to aid the
English.

ROMANCE

The twelfth century witnessed truly extraordinary bursts of textual activity, in France and England especially. The first half of the century saw remarkable advances in theological, scientific, and historiographical writing. The second half of the twelfth century gave rise, partly in response to those earlier advances, to a daring and sophisticated literary narrative of a kind hardly seen in Europe since late antiquity—that of romance. This genre remained central to later medieval literary culture; we pause now to sketch its fundamental qualities in general, before introducing our first romance, the Welsh text *The Lady of the Fountain*.

Romances satisfy our deepest imaginative desires. If we most fear loss of identity in separation from what we hold dearest and from what makes us what we are, romances allay that fear. As they imagine narratives of separation, errancy, and loss, they therapeutically deliver endings of reintegration, recovery, and return. That which was lost is found.

The word *romans* was originally a simple linguistic designation meaning “French,” since French was derived from Latin, the language of Rome. In the twelfth century, however, the word narrowed in meaning, coming to designate narrative (forms of *roman* still mean “the novel” in French, Italian, and German). The word then became particularly associated with a genre of narrative: it came to designate stories of separation and return, disintegration and reintegration.

Certainly classical Greek literature has examples of “romance” narrative, stories that involve separation, testing, and travel, all the

prelude to, and premise of, a final homecoming and recognition. Homer's *Odyssey* is fundamentally a romance; five later Greek narratives of this kind, written in the first through fourth centuries C.E., also survive. In medieval terminology, these are "comic" stories: thus Dante calls his great poem *The Divine Comedy*; Chaucer refers to the *Canterbury Tales* as a "comédie." Medieval romances are comic not because they make us laugh but rather because they, like Shakespeare's comedies, make us feel good through their happy endings.

The dynamic French-speaking court cultures of twelfth-century France and England gave the genre its most powerful, undying impetus. Chrétien de Troyes (fl. 1160–1190) is its greatest exponent in his Arthurian romances, but the rich set of Tristan materials and the lays of Marie de France are also of exceptional importance. The genre, once deeply planted in the twelfth century in French, flourishes anew in all European vernacular languages and in each historical period of European and American culture (many popular movies are romances in this sense). It remains energetically immune to the literary attacks grounded in moralistic objection, high literary disdain for escapist entertainment, and satire.

The fundamental characteristic of romances is structural, not stylistic. They can be short or long, oral or literary, but to be romances they must have, or adapt, a particular configuration. Romances classically have a tripartite structure: integration (or implied integration), disintegration, and reintegration. They begin in, or at least imply, a protected, civilized state of some integrated social unit (for example, the family). That state is disrupted, expelling a member of the unit—the hero or heroine of the story, who is usually young—into a wild place. Undergoing the tests of that wild place is required for return to the integrated, civilized state of familial or social unity. Successfully undergoing tests in the wild often results in marriage, in which case the return to home and family is also a return to an enlarged home and family.



The Dance of Mirth. *The Romance of the Rose*, ca. 1500. The scene illustrates a moment in the thirteenth-century French poem. Note the splendor and circularity of this aristocratic performance of amorous ritual.

This story pattern is characteristic of many fairy stories, medieval romances, Shakespearean comedies, novels, and popular movies. It not only represents desire but activates desire in its readers: the pleasure we take in such stories derives from our desire for the reintegration of lives in a coherent and constructive narrative.

The desired pattern can also, of course, be adapted in many variations. In particular, it can be activated in order to be frustrated: some protagonists, particularly adulterous ones such as Tristan and Ysolt, never reach home, forever needing to defer that unreachable happy ending of recognition. Romances, then, are symbolic stories, replaying and allaying the fears of the young as they face the apparently insuperable challenges of the adult world. Their deepest wisdom is this: civilization is not a unitary concept. To enter into and remain in the world of civilized order, we must, say romances, have commerce with all that threatens it. To regain Rome at the center, we must first be tested in the marginal wilds of romance. To be recognized and found, we must first be lost.

The examples of romance offered in this anthology exemplify different possibilities derived from this story structure. *The Lady of the Fountain* and *Sir Orfeo* are classic examples, true in almost every respect to the model sketched above. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* play fascinating games with classic romance structure. *Milun* and *Lanval* suggest different possibilities for romance within the rigid and suffocating context of the medieval court. *Chevrefoil* expresses the way in which the aspiration to achieve a happy ending is all the more painfully intense because such an ending is impossible. The sample from Thomas's *Tristan* ([pp. 192–96](#)) underlines the inevitable end of such a passion.

THE LADY OF THE FOUNTAIN

The Lady of the Fountain (in Welsh, *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynawn*) is the first romance in this edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. It is an Arthurian prose romance recounting the story of Owain, a knight who excels in battle and marries his beloved. Yet this early “happy ending” is disrupted when Owain neglects his responsibilities to his wife in favor of chivalric adventures. Loss, madness, and violent struggle ensue, before we arrive at the harmonious resolution promised by the genre of romance.

This work is one of three surviving Welsh romances telling stories that were also told by the brilliant and influential French poet Chrétien de Troyes (fl. 1170–1190). *The Lady of the Fountain* has a close relationship with Chrétien’s *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*. The Welsh version probably adapts and transforms Chrétien’s text, though it is possible that the two derive from a common source. *The Lady of the Fountain* appears in two important manuscripts of Middle Welsh literature from the fourteenth century, but the composition itself may be significantly older. Eleven narratives from these two manuscripts, including *The Lady of the Fountain*, are often grouped together under the modern title of *The Mabinogion* (a name that apparently reflects a scribal error).

The Lady of the Fountain is in many ways a paradigmatic medieval romance. Its hero follows the genre’s structuring plot of integration, disintegration, and reintegration into the social order. Both Owain’s madness and the prominent role of animals emphasize how nearby wildness lurks. At the same time, civilization is idealized

in sensory descriptions that dwell on the beauty and pleasures of aristocratic life. Women play an important role, especially in the character of Luned, Owain's essential ally. The story works by a logic of repetition and substitution, which asks readers to compare similar episodes and interpret their relations.

The unknown Welsh author wrote in a way characteristic of medieval romancers—refashioning an already existing story-world according to specific literary aims, in this case derived from Welsh narrative traditions. The protagonist "Owain the son of Urien" was a significant figure in the historical texts of Wales, and other Welsh persons and place-names feature throughout. In the narration, no distinct authorial voice offers commentary. Witty and erudite asides, of the kind found throughout Chrétien's *Yvain*, do not appear. Instead, the narration focuses on what is externally perceptible, creating an almost cinematic effect.

The Lady of the Fountain¹

King Arthur was at Caerlleon upon Usk.² One day he sat in his chamber; and with him were Owain the son of Urien, and Kynon the son of Clydno, and Kai the son of Kyner; and Gwenhwyvar and her handmaidens at needlework by the window.³ And if it should be said that there was a porter at Arthur's palace, there was none. Glewlwyd Gavaelvawr was there, acting as porter, to welcome guests and strangers, and to receive them with honour, and to inform them of the manners and customs of the court; and to direct those who came to the hall or to the presence-chamber, and those who came to take up their lodging.

In the centre of the chamber King Arthur sat upon a seat of green rushes, over which was spread a covering of flame-coloured satin, and a cushion of red satin was under his elbow.

Then Arthur spoke, "If I thought you would not disparage me," said he, "I would sleep while I wait for my repast; and you can entertain one another with relating tales and can obtain a flagon of mead and some meat from Kai." And the King went to sleep. And Kynon the son of Clydno asked Kai for that which Arthur had promised them. "I, too, will have the good tale which he promised to me," said Kai. "Nay," answered Kynon, "fairer will it be for thee to fulfill Arthur's behest, in the first place, and then we will tell thee the best tale that we know." So Kai went to the kitchen and to the mead-cellar and returned bearing a flagon of mead and a golden goblet and a handful of skewers, upon which were broiled collops of meat. Then they ate the collops and began to drink the mead. "Now," said Kai, "it is time for you to give me my story." "Kynon," said Owain, "do thou pay to Kai the tale that is his due." "Truly," said Kynon, "thou art older, and art a better teller of tales, and hast seen more marvellous things than I; do thou therefore pay Kai his tale."

"Begin thyself," quoth Owain, "with the best that thou knowest." "I will do so," answered Kynon.

"I was the only son of my mother and father, and I was exceedingly aspiring, and my daring was very great. I thought there was no enterprise in the world too mighty for me, and after I had achieved all the adventures that were in my own country, I equipped myself, and set forth to journey through deserts and distant regions. And at length it chanced that I came to the fairest valley in the world, wherein were trees of equal growth; and a river ran through the valley, and a path was by the side of the river. And I followed the path until midday and continued my journey along the remainder of the valley until the evening; and at the extremity of a plain I came to a large and lustrous castle, at the foot of which was a torrent. And I approached the castle, and there I beheld two youths with yellow curling hair, each with a frontlet of gold upon his head, and clad in a garment of yellow satin, and they had gold clasps upon their insteps. In the hand of each of them was an ivory bow, strung with the sinews of the stag; and their arrows had shafts of the bone of the whale and were winged with peacock's feathers; the shafts also had golden heads. And they had daggers with blades of gold and with hilts of the bone of the whale. And they were shooting their daggers.

"And a little way from them I saw a man in the prime of life, with his beard newly shorn, clad in a robe and a mantle of yellow satin; and round the top of his mantle was a band of gold lace. On his feet were shoes of variegated leather, fastened by two bosses of gold. When I saw him, I went towards him and saluted him, and such was his courtesy that he no sooner received my greeting than he returned it. And he went with me towards the castle. Now there were no dwellers in the castle except those who were in one hall. And there I saw four-and-twenty damsels, embroidering satin at a window. And this I tell thee, Kai, that the least fair of them was fairer than the fairest maid thou hast ever beheld in the island of Britain, and the least lovely of them was more lovely than Gwenhwyvar, the wife of Arthur, when she has appeared loveliest at

the Offering, on the day of the Nativity, or at the feast of Easter. They rose up at my coming, and six of them took my horse, and divested me of my armour; and six others took my arms and washed them in a vessel until they were perfectly bright. And the third six spread cloths upon the tables and prepared meat. And the fourth six took off my soiled garments and placed others upon me; namely, an undervest and a doublet of fine linen, and a robe, and a surcoat, and a mantle of yellow satin with a broad gold band upon the mantle. And they placed cushions both beneath and around me, with coverings of red linen; and I sat down. Now the six maidens who had taken my horse, unharnessed him, as well as if they had been the best squires in the island of Britain. Then, behold, they brought bowls of silver wherein was water to wash, and towels of linen, some green and some white; and I washed. And in a little while the man sat down to the table. And I sat next to him, and below me sat all the maidens, except those who waited on us. And the table was of silver, and the cloths upon the table were of linen; and no vessel was served upon the table that was not either of gold or of silver, or of buffalo horn. And our meat was brought to us. And verily, Kai, I saw there every sort of meat and every sort of liquor that I have ever seen elsewhere; but the meat and the liquor were better served there than I have ever seen them in any other place.

"Until the repast was half over, neither the man nor any one of the damsels spoke a single word to me; but when the man perceived that it would be more agreeable to me to converse than to eat any more, he began to inquire of me who I was. I said I was glad to find that there was someone who would discourse with me, and that it was not considered so great a crime at that court for people to hold converse together. 'Chieftain,' said the man, 'we would have talked to thee sooner, but we feared to disturb thee during thy repast; now, however, we will discourse.' Then I told the man who I was, and what was the cause of my journey; and said that I was seeking whether anyone was superior to me, or whether I could gain the mastery over all. The man looked upon me, and he smiled and said, 'If I did not fear to distress thee too much, I would

show thee that which thou seekest.' Upon this I became anxious and sorrowful, and when the man perceived it, he said, 'If thou wouldest rather that I should show thee thy disadvantage than thine advantage, I will do so. Sleep here tonight, and in the morning arise early, and take the road upwards through the valley until thou reachest the wood through which thou camest hither. A little way within the wood thou wilt meet with a road branching off to the right, by which thou must proceed, until thou comest to a large sheltered glade with a mound in the centre. And thou wilt see a black-haired man⁴ of great stature on the top of the mound. He is not smaller in size than two of the men of this world. He has but one foot; and one eye in the middle of his forehead. And he has a club of iron, and it is certain that there are no two men in the world who would not find their burden in that club. And he is not a comely man, but on the contrary he is exceedingly ill-favoured; and he is the woodward of that wood. And thou wilt see a thousand wild animals grazing around him. Inquire of him the way out of the glade, and he will reply to thee briefly, and will point out the road by which thou shalt find that which thou art in quest of.'

"And long seemed that night to me. And the next morning I arose and equipped myself, and mounted my horse, and proceeded straight through the valley to the wood; and I followed the crossroad which the man had pointed out to me, till at length I arrived at the glade. And there was I three times more astonished at the number of wild animals that I beheld, than the man had said I should be. And the black-haired man was there, sitting upon the top of the mound. Huge of stature as the man had told me that he was, I found him to exceed by far the description he had given me of him. As for the iron club which the man had told me was a burden for two men, I am certain, Kai, that it would be a heavy weight for four warriors to lift; and this was in the black-haired man's hand. And he only spoke to me in answer to my questions. Then I asked him what power he held over those animals. 'I will show thee, little man,' said he. And he took his club in his hand, and with it he struck a stag a great blow so that he brayed vehemently, and at his braying the

animals came together, as numerous as the stars in the sky, so that it was difficult for me to find room in the glade to stand among them. There were serpents, and dragons, and divers sorts of animals. And he looked at them and bade them go and feed; and they bowed their heads and did him homage as vassals to their lord.

"Then the black-haired man said to me, 'Seest thou now, little man, what power I hold over these animals?' Then I inquired of him the way, and he became very rough in his manner to me; however, he asked me whither I would go? And when I told him who I was and what I sought, he directed me. 'Take,' said he, 'that path that leads towards the head of the glade and ascend the wooded steep until thou comest to its summit; and there thou wilt find an open space like to a large valley, and in the midst of it a tall tree, whose branches are greener than the greenest pine trees. Under this tree is a fountain, and by the side of the fountain a marble slab, and on the marble slab a silver bowl, attached by a chain of silver, so that it may not be carried away. Take the bowl and throw a bowlful of water upon the slab, and thou wilt hear a mighty peal of thunder, so that thou wilt think that heaven and earth are trembling with its fury. With the thunder there will come a shower so severe that it will be scarce possible for thee to endure it and live. And the shower will be of hailstones; and after the shower, the weather will become fair, but every leaf that was upon the tree will have been carried away by the shower. Then a flight of birds will come and alight upon the tree; and in thine own country thou didst never hear a strain so sweet as that which they will sing. And at the moment thou art most delighted with the song of the birds, thou wilt hear a murmuring and complaining coming towards thee along the valley. And thou wilt see a knight upon a coal-black horse, clothed in black velvet, and with a pennon of black linen upon his lance; and he will ride unto thee to encounter thee with the utmost speed. If thou fleest from him he will overtake thee, and if thou abidest there, as sure as thou art a mounted knight, he will leave thee on foot. And if thou dost not find trouble in that adventure, thou needest not seek it during the rest of thy life.'

“So I journeyed on, until I reached the summit of the steep, and there I found everything as the black-haired man had described it to me. And I went up to the tree, and beneath it I saw the fountain, and by its side the marble slab, and the silver bowl fastened by the chain. Then I took the bowl and cast a bowlful of water upon the slab; and thereupon, behold, the thunder came, much more violent than the black-haired man had led me to expect; and after the thunder came the shower; and of a truth I tell thee, Kai, that there is neither man nor beast that can endure that shower and live. For not one of those hailstones would be stopped, either by the flesh or by the skin, until it had reached the bone. I turned my horse’s flank towards the shower and placed the beak of my shield over his head and neck, while I held the upper part of it over my own head. And thus I withstood the shower. When I looked on the tree there was not a single leaf upon it, and then the sky became clear, and with that, behold the birds lighted upon the tree, and sang. And truly, Kai, I never heard any melody equal to that, either before or since. And when I was most charmed with listening to the birds, lo, a murmuring voice was heard through the valley, approaching me and saying, ‘Oh, Knight, what has brought thee hither? What evil have I done to thee, that thou shouldst act towards me and my possessions as thou hast this day? Dost thou not know that the shower today has left in my dominions neither man nor beast alive that was exposed to it?’ And thereupon, behold, a Knight on a black horse appeared, clothed in jet-black velvet, and with a tabard of black linen about him. And we charged each other, and, as the onset was furious, it was not long before I was overthrown. Then the Knight passed the shaft of his lance through the bridle rein of my horse and rode off with the two horses, leaving me where I was. And he did not even bestow so much notice upon me as to imprison me, nor did he despoil me of my arms. So I returned along the road by which I had come. And when I reached the glade where the black-haired man was, I confess to thee, Kai, it is a marvel that I did not melt down into a liquid pool, through the shame that I felt at the black-haired man’s derision. And that night I came to the same castle where I had spent the night preceding. And I was more agreeably

entertained that night than I had been the night before; and I was better feasted, and I conversed freely with the inmates of the castle, and none of them alluded to my expedition to the fountain, neither did I mention it to any; and I remained there that night. When I arose on the morrow, I found, ready saddled, a dark bay palfrey, with nostrils as red as scarlet; and after putting on my armour and leaving there my blessing, I returned to my own court. And that horse I still possess, and he is in the stable yonder. And I declare that I would not part with him for the best palfrey in the island of Britain.

"Now of a truth, Kai, no man ever before confessed to an adventure so much to his own discredit, and verily it seems strange to me, that neither before nor since have I heard of any person besides myself who knew of this adventure, and that the subject of it should exist within King Arthur's dominions, without any other person lighting upon it."

"Now," quoth Owain, "would it not be well to go and endeavour to discover that place?"

"By the hand of my friend," said Kai, "often dost thou utter that with thy tongue which thou wouldst not make good with thy deeds."

"In very truth," said Gwenhwyvar, "it were better thou wert hanged, Kai, than to use such uncourteous speech towards a man like Owain."

"By the hand of my friend, good Lady," said Kai, "thy praise of Owain is not greater than mine."

With that Arthur awoke and asked if he had not been sleeping a little.

"Yes, Lord," answered Owain, "thou hast slept awhile."

"Is it time for us to go to meat?"

"It is, Lord," said Owain.

Then the horn for washing was sounded, and the King and all his household sat down to eat. And when the meal was ended, Owain withdrew to his lodging, and made ready his horse and his arms.

On the morrow, with the dawn of day, he put on his armour, and mounted his charger, and travelled through distant lands and over

desert mountains. And at length he arrived at the valley which Kynon had described to him; and he was certain that it was the same that he sought. And journeying along the valley by the side of the river, he followed its course till he came to the plain and within sight of the castle. When he approached the castle, he saw the youths shooting their daggers in the place where Kynon had seen them, and the blond man, to whom the castle belonged, standing hard by. And no sooner had Owain saluted the blond man than he was saluted by him in return.

And he went forward towards the castle, and there he saw the chamber, and when he had entered the chamber he beheld the maidens working at satin embroidery, in chairs of gold. And their beauty and their comeliness seemed to Owain far greater than Kynon had represented to him. And they rose to wait upon Owain, as they had done to Kynon, and the meal which they set before him gave more satisfaction to Owain than it had done to Kynon.

About the middle of the repast, the blond man asked Owain the object of his journey. And Owain made it known to him and said, "I am in quest of the Knight who guards the fountain." Upon this the blond man smiled and said that he was as loth to point out that adventure to Owain as he had been to Kynon. However, he described the whole to Owain, and they retired to rest.

The next morning Owain found his horse made ready for him by the damsels, and he set forward and came to the glade where the black-haired man was. And the stature of the black-haired man seemed more wonderful to Owain than it had done to Kynon, and Owain asked of him his road, and he showed it to him. And Owain followed the road, as Kynon had done, till he came to the green tree; and he beheld the fountain, and the slab beside the fountain, with the bowl upon it. And Owain took the bowl and threw a bowlful of water upon the slab. And, lo, the thunder was heard, and after the thunder came the shower, much more violent than Kynon had described, and after the shower the sky became bright. And when Owain looked at the tree, there was not one leaf upon it. And immediately the birds came, and settled upon the tree, and sang.

And when their song was most pleasing to Owain, he beheld a Knight coming towards him through the valley, and he prepared to receive him; and encountered him violently. Having broken both their lances, they drew their swords and fought blade to blade. Then Owain struck the Knight a blow through his helmet, headpiece and visor, and through the skin, and the flesh, and the bone, until it wounded the very brain. Then the black Knight felt that he had received a mortal wound, upon which he turned his horse's head, and fled. And Owain pursued him, and followed close upon him, although he was not near enough to strike him with his sword. Thereupon Owain descried a vast and resplendent castle. And they came to the castle gate. And the black Knight was allowed to enter, and the portcullis was let fall upon Owain; and it struck his horse behind the saddle, and cut him in two, and carried away the rowels of the spurs that were upon Owain's heels. And the portcullis descended to the floor. And the rowels of the spurs and part of the horse were without, and Owain with the other part of the horse remained between the two gates, and the inner gate was closed, so that Owain could not go thence; and Owain was in a perplexing situation. And while he was in this state, he could see through an aperture in the gate, a street facing him, with a row of houses on each side. And he beheld a maiden, with yellow curling hair, and a frontlet of gold upon her head; and she was clad in a dress of yellow satin, and on her feet were shoes of variegated leather. And she approached the gate, and desired that it should be opened. "Heaven knows, Lady," said Owain, "it is no more possible for me to open to thee from hence, than it is for thee to set me free." "Truly," said the damsel, "it is very sad that thou canst not be released, and every woman ought to succour thee, for I never saw one more faithful in the service of ladies than thou. As a friend thou art the most sincere, and as a lover the most devoted. Therefore," quoth she, "whatever is in my power to do for thy release, I will do it. Take this ring and put it on thy finger, with the stone inside thy hand; and close thy hand upon the stone. And as long as thou concealest it, it will conceal thee. When they have consulted together, they will come forth to fetch thee, in order to put thee to death; and they will be much

grieved that they cannot find thee. And I will await thee on the horseblock yonder; and thou wilt be able to see me, though I cannot see thee; therefore come and place thy hand upon my shoulder, that I may know that thou art near me. And by the way that I go hence, do thou accompany me."

Then she went away from Owain, and he did all that the maiden had told him. And the people of the castle came to seek Owain, to put him to death, and when they found nothing but the half of his horse, they were sorely grieved.

And Owain vanished from among them, and went to the maiden, and placed his hand upon her shoulder; whereupon she set off, and Owain followed her, until they came to the door of a large and beautiful chamber, and the maiden opened it, and they went in, and closed the door. And Owain looked around the chamber, and behold there was not even a single nail in it that was not painted with gorgeous colours; and there was not a single panel that had not sundry images in gold portrayed upon it.

The maiden kindled a fire, and took water in a silver bowl, and put a towel of white linen on her shoulder and gave Owain water to wash. Then she placed before him a silver table, inlaid with gold, upon which was a cloth of yellow linen; and she brought him food. And of a truth, Owain had never seen any kind of meat that was not there in abundance, but it was better cooked there than he had ever found it in any other place. Nor did he ever see so excellent a display of meat and drink, as there. And there was not one vessel from which he was served, that was not of gold or of silver. And Owain ate and drank, until late in the afternoon, when lo, they heard a mighty clamour in the castle; and Owain asked the maiden what that outcry was. "They are administering extreme unction,"⁵ said she, "to the nobleman who owns the castle." And Owain went to sleep.

The couch which the maiden had prepared for him was meet for Arthur himself; it was of scarlet, and fur, and satin, and sendal,⁶ and fine linen. In the middle of the night they heard a woeful outcry. "What outcry again is this?" said Owain. "The nobleman who owned

the castle is now dead," said the maiden. And a little after daybreak, they heard an exceeding loud clamour and wailing. And Owain asked the maiden what was the cause of it. "They are bearing to the church the body of the nobleman who owned the castle."

And Owain rose up, and clothed himself, and opened a window of the chamber, and looked towards the castle; and he could see neither the bounds, nor the extent of the hosts that filled the streets. And they were fully armed; and a vast number of women were with them, both on horseback and on foot; and all the ecclesiastics in the city, singing. And it seemed to Owain that the sky resounded with the vehemence of their cries, and with the noise of the trumpets, and with the singing of the ecclesiastics. In the midst of the throng, he beheld the bier, over which was a veil of white linen; and wax tapers were burning beside and around it, and none that supported the bier was lower in rank than a powerful baron.

Never did Owain see an assemblage so gorgeous with satin, and silk, and sendal. And following the train, he beheld a lady with yellow hair falling over her shoulders, and stained with blood; and about her a dress of yellow satin, which was torn. Upon her feet were shoes of variegated leather. And it was a marvel that the ends of her fingers were not bruised, from the violence with which she smote her hands together. Truly she would have been the fairest lady Owain ever saw, had she been in her usual guise. And her cry was louder than the shout of the men or the clamour of the trumpets. No sooner had he beheld the lady, than he became inflamed with her love, so that it took entire possession of him.

Then he inquired of the maiden who the lady was. "Heaven knows," replied the maiden, "she may be said to be the fairest, and the most chaste, and the most liberal, and the wisest, and the most noble of women. And she is my mistress; and she is called the Countess of the Fountain, the wife of him whom thou didst slay yesterday." "Verily," said Owain, "she is the woman that I love best." "Verily," said the maiden, "she shall also love thee not a little."

And with that the maid arose, and kindled a fire, and filled a pot with water, and placed it to warm; and she brought a towel of white

linen and placed it around Owain's neck; and she took a goblet of ivory and a silver basin and filled them with warm water, wherewith she washed Owain's head. Then she opened a wooden casket and drew forth a razor, whose haft was of ivory, and upon which were two rivets of gold. And she shaved his beard, and she dried his head, and his throat, with the towel. Then she rose up from before Owain and brought him to eat. And truly Owain had never so good a meal, nor was he ever so well served.

When he had finished his repast, the maiden arranged his couch. "Come here," said she, "and sleep, and I will go and woo for thee." And Owain went to sleep, and the maiden shut the door of the chamber after her and went towards the castle. When she came there, she found nothing but mourning and sorrow; and the Countess in her chamber could not bear the sight of anyone through grief. Luned² came and saluted her, but the Countess answered her not. And the maiden bent down towards her, and said, "What aileth thee, that thou answerest no one today?" "Luned," said the Countess, "what change hath befallen thee, that thou hast not come to visit me in my grief? It was wrong in thee, and I having made thee rich; it was wrong in thee that thou didst not come to see me in my distress. That was wrong in thee." "Truly," said Luned, "I thought thy good sense was greater than I find it to be. Is it well for thee to mourn after that good man, or for anything else, that thou canst not have?" "I declare to heaven," said the Countess, "that in the whole world there is not a man equal to him." "Not so," said Luned, "for an ugly man would be as good as or better than he." "I declare to heaven," said the Countess, "that were it not repugnant to me to cause to be put to death one whom I have brought up, I would have thee executed, for making such a comparison to me. As it is, I will banish thee." "I am glad," said Luned, "that thou hast no other cause to do so, than that I would have been of service to thee where thou didst not know what was to thine advantage. And henceforth evil betide whichever of us shall make the first advance towards reconciliation to the other; whether I should seek an

invitation from thee, or thou of thine own accord shouldst send to invite me."

With that Luned went forth: and the Countess arose and followed her to the door of the chamber and began coughing loudly. And when Luned looked back, the Countess beckoned to her; and she returned to the Countess. "In truth," said the Countess, "evil is thy disposition; but if thou knowest what is to my advantage, declare it to me." "I will do so," quoth she.

"Thou knowest that except by warfare and arms it is impossible for thee to preserve thy possessions; delay not, therefore, to seek someone who can defend them." "And how can I do that?" said the Countess. "I will tell thee," said Luned. "Unless thou canst defend the fountain, thou canst not maintain thy dominions; and no one can defend the fountain, except it be a knight of Arthur's household; and I will go to Arthur's court, and ill betide me, if I return thence without a warrior who can guard the fountain as well as, or even better than, he who defended it formerly." "That will be hard to perform," said the Countess. "Go, however, and make proof of that which thou hast promised."

Luned set out, under the pretence of going to Arthur's court; but she went back to the chamber where she had left Owain; and she tarried there with him as long as it might have taken her to have travelled to the court of King Arthur. And at the end of that time, she apparelled herself and went to visit the Countess. And the Countess was much rejoiced when she saw her and inquired what news she brought from the court. "I bring thee the best of news," said Luned, "for I have compassed the object of my mission. When wilt thou, that I should present to thee the chieftain who has come with me hither?" "Bring him here to visit me tomorrow, at midday," said the Countess, "and I will cause the town to be assembled by that time."

And Luned returned home. And the next day, at noon, Owain arrayed himself in a coat, and a surcoat, and a mantle of yellow satin, upon which was a broad band of gold lace; and on his feet were high shoes of variegated leather, which were fastened by

golden clasps, in the form of lions. And they proceeded to the chamber of the Countess.

Right glad was the Countess of their coming, and she gazed steadfastly upon Owain, and said, "Luned, this knight has not the look of a traveller." "What harm is there in that, lady?" said Luned. "I am certain," said the Countess, "that no other man than this chased the soul from the body of my lord." "So much the better for thee, lady," said Luned, "for had he not been stronger than thy lord he could not have deprived him of life. There is no remedy for that which is past, be it as it may." "Go back to thine abode," said the Countess, "and I will take counsel."

The next day the Countess caused all her subjects to assemble and showed them that her earldom was left defenceless, and that it could not be protected but with horse and arms and military skill. "Therefore," said she, "this is what I offer for your choice: either let one of you take me, or give your consent for me to take a husband from elsewhere to defend my dominions."

So they came to the determination that it was better that she should have permission to marry someone from elsewhere; and, thereupon, she sent for the bishops and archbishops to celebrate her nuptials with Owain. And the men of the earldom did Owain homage.

And Owain defended the Fountain with lance and sword. And this is the manner in which he defended it: Whensoever a knight came there he overthrew him and sold him for his full worth, and what he thus gained he divided among his barons and his knights; and no man in the whole world could be more beloved than he was by his subjects. And it was thus for the space of three years.

It befell that as Gwalchmai⁸ went forth one day with King Arthur, he perceived him to be very sad and sorrowful. And Gwalchmai was much grieved to see Arthur in this state; and he questioned him, saying, "Oh, my lord! what has befallen thee?" "In sooth, Gwalchmai," said Arthur, "I am grieved concerning Owain, whom I have lost these three years, and I shall certainly die if the fourth

year passes without my seeing him. Now I am sure, that it is through the tale which Kynon the son of Clydno related, that I have lost Owain." "There is no need for thee," said Gwalchmai, "to summon to arms thy whole dominions on this account, for thou thyself and the men of thy household will be able to avenge Owain, if he be slain; or to set him free, if he be in prison; and, if alive, to bring him back with thee." And it was settled according to what Gwalchmai had said.

Then Arthur and the men of his household prepared to go and seek Owain, and their number was three thousand, besides their attendants. And Kynon the son of Clydno acted as their guide. And Arthur came to the castle where Kynon had been before, and when he came there the youths were shooting in the same place, and the blond man was standing hard by. When the blond man saw Arthur he greeted him and invited him to the castle; and Arthur accepted his invitation, and they entered the castle together. And great as was the number of his retinue, their presence was scarcely observed in the castle, so vast was its extent. And the maidens rose up to wait on them, and the service of the maidens appeared to them all to excel any attendance they had ever met with; and even the pages who had charge of the horses were no worse served, that night, than Arthur himself would have been in his own palace.

The next morning Arthur set out thence, with Kynon for his guide, and came to the place where the black-haired man was. And the stature of the black-haired man was more surprising to Arthur than it had been represented to him. And they came to the top of the wooded steep and traversed the valley till they reached the green tree, where they saw the fountain, and the bowl, and the slab. And upon that, Kai came to Arthur and spoke to him. "My lord," said he, "I know the meaning of all this, and my request is, that thou wilt permit me to throw the water on the slab, and to receive the first adventure that may befall." And Arthur gave him leave.

Then Kai threw a bowlful of water upon the slab, and immediately there came the thunder, and after the thunder the shower. And such a thunderstorm they had never known before, and

many of the attendants who were in Arthur's train were killed by the shower. After the shower had ceased the sky became clear; and on looking at the tree they beheld it completely leafless. Then the birds descended upon the tree, and the song of the birds was far sweeter than any strain they had ever heard before. Then they beheld a knight on a coal-black horse, clothed in black satin, coming rapidly towards them. And Kai met him and encountered him, and it was not long before Kai was overthrown. And the knight withdrew, and Arthur and his host encamped for the night.

And when they arose in the morning, they perceived the signal of combat upon the lance of the Knight. And Kai came to Arthur, and spoke to him: "My lord," said he, "though I was overthrown yesterday, if it seem good to thee, I would gladly meet the Knight again today." "Thou mayst do so," said Arthur. And Kai went towards the Knight. And on the spot he overthrew Kai and struck him with the head of his lance in the forehead, so that it broke his helmet and the headpiece, and pierced the skin and the flesh, the breadth of the spearhead, even to the bone. And Kai returned to his companions.

After this, all the household of Arthur went forth, one after the other, to combat the Knight, until there was not one that was not overthrown by him, except Arthur and Gwalchmai. And Arthur armed himself to encounter the Knight. "Oh, my lord," said Gwalchmai, "permit me to fight with him first." And Arthur permitted him. And he went forth to meet the Knight, having over himself and his horse a satin robe of honour which had been sent him by the daughter of the Earl of Rhangyw, and in this dress he was not known by any of the host. And they charged each other and fought all that day until the evening, and neither of them was able to unhorse the other.

The next day they fought with strong lances, and neither of them could obtain the mastery.

And the third day they fought with exceeding strong lances. And they were incensed with rage and fought furiously, even until noon. And they gave each other such a shock that the girths of their horses were broken, so that they fell over their horses' cruppers to the ground. And they rose up speedily, and drew their swords, and

resumed the combat; and the multitude that witnessed their encounter felt assured that they had never before seen two men so valiant or so powerful. And had it been midnight, it would have been light from the fire that flashed from their weapons. And the Knight gave Gwalchmai a blow that turned his helmet from off his face, so that the Knight knew that it was Gwalchmai. Then Owain said, "My lord Gwalchmai, I did not know thee for my cousin, owing to the robe of honour that enveloped thee; take my sword and my arms." Said Gwalchmai, "Thou, Owain, art the victor; take thou my sword." And with that Arthur saw that they were conversing, and advanced towards them. "My lord Arthur," said Gwalchmai, "here is Owain, who has vanquished me, and will not take my arms." "My lord," said Owain, "it is he that has vanquished me, and he will not take my sword." "Give me your swords," said Arthur, "and then neither of you has vanquished the other." Then Owain put his arms around Arthur's neck, and they embraced. And all the host hurried forward to see Owain and to embrace him; and there was nigh being a loss of life, so great was the press.

And they retired that night, and the next day Arthur prepared to depart. "My lord," said Owain, "this is not well of thee; for I have been absent from thee these three years, and during all that time, up to this very day, I have been preparing a banquet for thee, knowing that thou wouldst come to seek me. Tarry with me, therefore, until thou and thy attendants have recovered the fatigues of the journey and have been anointed."

And they all proceeded to the castle of the Countess of the Fountain, and the banquet which had been three years preparing was consumed in three months. Never had they a more delicious or agreeable banquet. And Arthur prepared to depart. Then he sent an embassy to the Countess, to beseech her to permit Owain to go with him for the space of three months, that he might show him to the nobles and the fair dames of the island of Britain. And the Countess gave her consent, although it was very painful to her. So Owain came with Arthur to the island of Britain. And when he was once

more amongst his kindred and friends, he remained three years, instead of three months, with them.

And as Owain one day sat at meat, in the city of Caerlleon upon Usk, behold a damsel⁹ entered upon a bay horse, with a curling mane and covered with foam, and the bridle and so much as was seen of the saddle were of gold. And the damsel was arrayed in a dress of yellow satin. And she came up to Owain and took the ring from off his hand. "Thus," said she, "shall be treated the deceiver, the traitor, the faithless, the disgraced, and the beardless." And she turned her horse's head and departed.

Then his adventure came to Owain's remembrance, and he was sorrowful; and having finished eating he went to his own abode and made preparations that night. And the next day he arose but did not go to the court, but wandered to the distant parts of the earth and to uncultivated mountains. And he remained there until all his apparel was worn out, and his body was wasted away, and his hair was grown long. And he went about with the wild beasts and fed with them, until they became familiar with him; but at length he grew so weak that he could no longer bear them company. Then he descended from the mountains to the valley and came to a park that was the fairest in the world and belonged to a widowed Countess.

One day the Countess and her maidens went forth to walk by a lake, that was in the middle of the park. And they saw the form of a man. And they were terrified. Nevertheless they went near him, and touched him, and looked at him. And they saw that there was life in him, though he was exhausted by the heat of the sun. And the Countess returned to the castle, and took a flask full of precious ointment and gave it to one of her maidens. "Go with this," said she, "and take with thee yonder horse and clothing, and place them near the man we saw just now. And anoint him with this balsam, near his heart; and if there is life in him, he will arise through the efficacy of this balsam. Then watch what he will do."

And the maiden departed from her, and poured the whole of the balsam upon Owain, and left the horse and the garments hard by,

and went a little way off, and hid herself to watch him. In a short time she saw him begin to move his arms; and he rose up, and looked at his person, and became ashamed of the unseemliness of his appearance. Then he perceived the horse and the garments that were near him. And he crept forward till he was able to draw the garments to him from off the saddle. And he clothed himself and with difficulty mounted the horse. Then the damsel discovered herself to him and saluted him. And he was rejoiced when he saw her and inquired of her what land and what territory that was. "Truly," said the maiden, "a widowed Countess owns yonder castle; at the death of her husband, he left her two Earldoms, but at this day she has but this one dwelling that has not been wrested from her by a young Earl, who is her neighbour, because she refused to become his wife." "That is pity," said Owain. And he and the maiden proceeded to the castle; and he alighted there, and the maiden conducted him to a pleasant chamber, and kindled a fire and left him.

And the maiden came to the Countess and gave the flask into her hand. "Ha! maiden," said the Countess, "where is all the balsam?" "Have I not used it all?" said she. "Oh, maiden," said the Countess, "I cannot easily forgive thee this; it is sad for me to have wasted seven-score pounds' worth of precious ointment upon a stranger whom I know not. However, maiden, wait thou upon him, until he is quite recovered."

And the maiden did so, and furnished him with meat and drink, and fire, and lodging, and medicaments, until he was well again. And in three months he was restored to his former guise and became even more comely than he had ever been before.

One day Owain heard a great tumult and a sound of arms in the castle, and he inquired of the maiden the cause thereof. "The Earl," said she, "whom I mentioned to thee, has come before the castle, with a numerous army, to subdue the Countess." And Owain inquired of her whether the Countess had a horse and arms in her possession. "She has the best in the world," said the maiden. "Wilt thou go and request the loan of a horse and arms for me," said

Owain, "that I may go and look at this army?" "I will," said the maiden.

And she came to the Countess and told her what Owain had said. And the Countess laughed. "Truly," said she, "I will even give him a horse and arms forever; such a horse and such arms had he never yet, and I am glad that they should be taken by him today, lest my enemies should have them against my will tomorrow. Yet I know not what he would do with them."

The Countess bade them bring out a beautiful black steed, upon which was a beechen saddle, and a suit of armour, for man and horse. And Owain armed himself, and mounted the horse, and went forth, attended by two pages completely equipped, with horses and arms. And when they came near to the Earl's army, they could see neither its extent nor its extremity. And Owain asked the pages in which troop the Earl was. "In yonder troop," said they, "in which are four yellow standards. Two of them are before, and two behind him." "Now," said Owain, "do you return and await me near the portal of the castle." So they returned, and Owain pressed forward until he met the Earl. And Owain drew him completely out of his saddle and turned his horse's head towards the castle, and though it was with difficulty, he brought the Earl to the portal, where the pages awaited him. And in they came. And Owain presented the Earl as a gift to the Countess. And said to her, "Behold a requital to thee for thy blessed balsam."

The army encamped around the castle. And the Earl restored to the Countess the two Earldoms he had taken from her, as a ransom for his life; and for his freedom he gave her the half of his own dominions, and all his gold, and his silver, and his jewels, besides hostages.

And Owain took his departure. And the Countess and all her subjects besought him to remain, but Owain chose rather to wander through distant lands and deserts.

And as he journeyed, he heard a loud yelling in a wood. And it was repeated a second and a third time. And Owain went towards the spot and beheld a huge craggy mound, in the middle of the

wood; on the side of which was a grey rock. And there was a cleft in the rock, and a serpent was within the cleft. And near the rock stood a black lion, and every time the lion sought to go thence, the serpent darted towards him to attack him. And Owain unsheathed his sword and drew near to the rock; and as the serpent sprang out, he struck him with his sword, and cut him in two. And he dried his sword, and went on his way, as before. But behold the lion followed him and played about him, as though it had been a greyhound that he had reared.

They proceeded thus throughout the day, until the evening. And when it was time for Owain to take his rest, he dismounted and turned his horse loose in a flat and wooded meadow. And he struck fire, and when the fire was kindled, the lion brought him fuel enough to last for three nights. And the lion disappeared. And presently the lion returned, bearing a fine large roebuck. And he threw it down before Owain, who went towards the fire with it.

And Owain took the roebuck, and skinned it, and placed collops of its flesh upon skewers, around the fire. The rest of the buck he gave to the lion to devour. While he was doing this, he heard a deep sigh near him, and a second, and a third. And Owain called out to know whether the sigh he heard proceeded from a mortal; and he received answer that it did. "Who art thou?" said Owain. "Truly," said the voice, "I am Luned, the handmaiden of the Countess of the Fountain." "And what dost thou here?" said Owain. "I am imprisoned," said she, "on account of the knight who came from Arthur's court and married the Countess. And he stayed a short time with her, but he afterwards departed for the court of Arthur and has not returned since. And he was the friend I loved best in the world. And two of the pages in the Countess's chamber traduced him and called him a deceiver. And I told them that they two were not a match for him alone. So they imprisoned me in the stone vault and said that I should be put to death, unless he came himself to deliver me, by a certain day; and that is no further off than the day after tomorrow. And I have no one to send to seek him for me. And his name is Owain the son of Urien." "And art thou certain that if that

knight knew all this, he would come to thy rescue?" "I am most certain of it," said she.

When the collops were cooked, Owain divided them into two parts, between himself and the maiden; and after they had eaten, they talked together, until the day dawned. And the next morning Owain inquired of the damsel, if there was any place where he could get food and entertainment for that night. "There is, Lord," said she; "cross over yonder, and go along the side of the river, and in a short time thou wilt see a great castle, in which are many towers, and the Earl who owns that castle is the most hospitable man in the world. There thou mayst spend the night."

Never did sentinel keep stricter watch over his lord than the lion that night over Owain.

And Owain accoutred his horse, and passed across by the ford, and came in sight of the castle. And he entered it and was honourably received. And his horse was well cared for, and plenty of fodder was placed before him. Then the lion went and lay down in the horse's manger; so that none of the people of the castle dared to approach him. The treatment which Owain met with there was such as he had never known elsewhere, for everyone was as sorrowful as though death had been upon him. And they went to meat; and the Earl sat upon one side of Owain, and on the other side his only daughter. And Owain had never seen any more lovely than she. Then the lion came and placed himself between Owain's feet, and he fed him with every kind of food that he took himself. And he never saw anything equal to the sadness of the people.

In the middle of the repast the Earl began to bid Owain welcome. "Then," said Owain, "behold, it is time for thee to be cheerful." "Heaven knows," said the Earl, "that it is not thy coming that makes us sorrowful, but we have cause enough for sadness and care." "What is that?" said Owain. "I have two sons," replied the Earl, "and yesterday they went to the mountains to hunt. Now there is on the mountain a monster who kills men and devours them, and he seized my sons; and tomorrow is the time he has fixed to be here, and he threatens that he will then slay my sons before my eyes, unless I will

deliver into his hands this my daughter. He has the form of a man, but in stature he is no less than a giant."

"Truly," said Owain, "that is lamentable. And which wilt thou do?" "Heaven knows," said the Earl, "it will be better that my sons should be slain against my will, than that I should voluntarily give up my daughter to him to ill-treat and destroy." Then they talked about other things, and Owain stayed there that night.

The next morning they heard an exceeding great clamour, which was caused by the coming of the giant with the two youths. And the Earl was anxious both to protect his castle and to release his two sons. Then Owain put on his armour and went forth to encounter the giant, and the lion followed him. And when the giant saw that Owain was armed, he rushed towards him and attacked him. And the lion fought with the giant much more fiercely than Owain did. "Truly," said the giant, "I should find no difficulty in fighting with thee, were it not for the animal that is with thee." Upon that Owain took the lion back to the castle and shut the gate upon him, and then he returned to fight the giant, as before. And the lion roared very loud, for he heard that it went hard with Owain. And he climbed up till he reached the top of the Earl's hall, and thence he got to the top of the castle, and he sprang down from the walls and went and joined Owain. And the lion gave the giant a stroke with his paw, which tore him from his shoulder to his hip, and his heart was laid bare, and the giant fell down dead. Then Owain restored the two youths to their father.

The Earl besought Owain to remain with him, and he would not, but set forward towards the meadow where Luned was. And when he came there he saw a great fire kindled, and two youths with beautiful curling auburn hair were leading the maiden to cast her into the fire. And Owain asked them what charge they had against her. And they told him of the compact that was between them, as the maiden had done the night before. "And," said they, "Owain has failed her, therefore we are taking her to be burnt." "Truly," said Owain, "he is a good knight, and if he knew that the maiden was in such peril, I marvel that he came not to her rescue; but if you will

accept me in his stead, I will do battle with you." "We will," said the youths, "by him who made us."

And they attacked Owain, and he was hard beset by them. And with that the lion came to Owain's assistance, and they two got the better of the young men. And they said to him, "Chieftain, it was not agreed that we should fight save with thyself alone, and it is harder for us to contend with yonder animal than with thee." And Owain put the lion in the place where the maiden had been imprisoned, and blocked up the door with stones, and he went to fight with the young men, as before. But Owain had not his usual strength, and the two youths pressed hard upon him. And the lion roared incessantly at seeing Owain in trouble; and he burst through the wall until he found a way out, and rushed upon the young men, and instantly slew them. So Luned was saved from being burned.

Then Owain returned with Luned to the dominions of the Countess of the Fountain. And when he went thence he took the Countess with him to Arthur's court, and she was his wife as long as she lived.

And then he took the road that led to the court of the Black Oppressor,¹ and Owain fought with him, and the lion did not quit Owain until he had vanquished him. And when he reached the court of the Black Oppressor he entered the hall and beheld four-and-twenty ladies, the fairest that could be seen. And the garments which they had on were not worth four-and-twenty pence, and they were as sorrowful as death. And Owain asked them the cause of their sadness. And they said, "We are the daughters of Earls, and we all came here with our husbands, whom we dearly loved. And we were received with honour and rejoicing. And we were thrown into a state of stupor, and while we were thus, the demon who owns this castle slew all our husbands, and took from us our horses, and our raiment, and our gold, and our silver; and the corpses of our husbands are still in this house, and many others with them. And this, Chieftain, is the cause of our grief, and we are sorry that thou art come hither, lest harm should befall thee."

And Owain was grieved when he heard this. And he went forth from the castle, and he beheld a knight approaching him, who saluted him in a friendly and cheerful manner, as if he had been a brother. And this was the Black Oppressor. "In very sooth," said Owain, "it is not to seek thy friendship that I am here." "In sooth," said he, "thou shalt not find it then." And with that they charged each other and fought furiously. And Owain overcame him and bound his hands behind his back. Then the Black Oppressor besought Owain to spare his life, and spoke thus: "My lord Owain," said he, "it was foretold that thou shouldst come hither and vanquish me, and thou hast done so. I was a robber here, and my house was a house of spoil;² but grant me my life, and I will become the keeper of an hospice,² and I will maintain this house as an hospice for weak and for strong, as long as I live, for the good of thy soul." And Owain accepted this proposal of him and remained there that night.

And the next day he took the four-and-twenty ladies, and their horses, and their raiment, and what they possessed of goods and jewels, and proceeded with them to Arthur's court. And if Arthur was rejoiced when he saw him, after he had lost him the first time, his joy was now much greater. And of those ladies, such as wished to remain in Arthur's court remained there, and such as wished to depart departed.

And thenceforward Owain dwelt at Arthur's court greatly beloved, as the head of his household, until he went away with his followers; and those were the army of three hundred ravens³ which Kenverchyn had left him. And wherever Owain went with these he was victorious.

And this is the tale of THE LADY OF THE FOUNTAIN.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is from Charlotte Guest, *The Mabinogion* (London: Longmans, 1849); at a few points the text has been modified for comprehensibility.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The location in Wales that is home of Arthur's court in this and other Welsh romances.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Some of these names correspond closely to French Arthurian tradition: Gwenhwyvar is Queen Guinevere; Kai, Arthur's steward Kay. Others, like Kynon, are distinctively Welsh.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This figure is called *y gwr du*, literally, "the black man"; however, color as an adjective for a person in Welsh usually refers to hair color.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, administering a ritual in which a priest prays for the recovery and salvation of someone who is seriously ill.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Fine, light silk used for luxury garments.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: This is the first time the maiden's name is used.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Gwalchmai corresponds to Gawain in French and English Arthurian traditions.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Apparently not Luned.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: This episode is a simplification and displacement of an inset narrative found in Chrétien's *Yvain*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A charitable guesthouse.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Owain's own military forces.[Return to reference 3](#)

MARIE DE FRANCE

fl. ca. 1180

Much of twelfth-century “French” literature was composed in England in the Anglo-Norman dialect (see [p. 5](#)). Prominent among the earliest poets writing in the French vernacular, who shaped the themes and styles of later medieval European poetry, is the author who, in an epilogue to her *Fables*, calls herself Marie de France. That signature tells us that her given name was Marie and that she was born in France, but circumstantial evidence from her writings shows that she spent much of her life in England. A reference to her in a French poem written in England around 1180 speaks of “dame Marie” who wrote “lais” much loved and praised by counts, barons, knights, and ladies. She dedicates the *Lais* to a “noble king” who was most likely Henry II of England, who reigned from 1154 to 1189.

Three works can be safely attributed to Marie, probably written in the following order: the *Lais* (the English word “lay” refers to a short narrative poem), the *Fables*, and *St. Patrick’s Purgatory*. Marie’s twelve lays are short romances, ranging from 118 to 1,184 lines; each recounts a conflict or crisis in the affairs of noble lovers. In her prologue, Marie tells us that she heard versions of these lays performed, and in several places she refers to Breton storytellers—that is, professional minstrels from the French province of Brittany or the Celtic parts of Britain. Marie’s lays helped establish the genre that came to be known as the “Breton lay,” which also includes *Sir*

Orfeo (see [pp. 363–75](#)). The portrait of the author that emerges from Marie's works is of a highly educated noblewoman, proficient in Latin and English as well as her native French, writing for an elite audience. Her works occasionally comment on their own literary production, signaling Marie's self-possessed awareness of her craft.

The *Lais* participated in the period's elevation of erotic love to a worthy topic for literature. Together, the lays in the collection present a multifaceted picture of desire—frequently ennobling or even supernatural in its power, but sometimes limited or imperfect. Lovers often find themselves pulled between social obligation and self-fulfillment. In *Milun*, for instance, both an oppressive system of marriage and chivalry's demands for competitive honor keep the lovers apart. In *Lanval*, Arthur's court is the scene not of noble comradeship but of the hero's mistreatment, relieved only in the privacy of love. Notably, many of the lays offer the perspectives of women as well as men.

The brevity of the lay tends to emphasize small, vivid details, which take on symbolic force in the course of a narrative—such as the swan in *Milun*, the nightingale in *Laüstic*, or, in *Chevrefoil*, the honeysuckle wrapped around the hazel tree. Because Marie's lays are structured by repetition, contrast, multivalent symbol, and sudden change, interpreting one can feel like solving a puzzle, or explaining a dream. They often emphasize the creation and interpretation of signs, as though reflecting on their own processes of meaning making.

Marie wrote in eight-syllable couplets, which was the standard form of French narrative verse, employed also by Wace (see [p. 140](#)) and Chrétien de Troyes. Here is the beginning of the prologue to the *Lais* in its original Anglo-Norman French as well as a modern English translation, where Marie reflects on a writer's duty to share her talent:

Ki Deu ad duné escïence
E de parler bon' eloquence
Ne s'en deit taisir ne celer,

Ainz se deit volunTERS mustrer.

Whoever has received knowledge
and eloquence in speech from God
should not be silent or secretive
but demonstrate it willingly.

The following translations are by Robert Hanning and Joan
Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie de France* (1978).

Milun

Whoever wants to tell a variety of stories
ought to have a variety of beginnings,
and speak so intelligently
that people will enjoy listening.
Now I'll begin *Milun*
5 and show, in a brief discourse,
why and how the *lai*
called by that name was written.
Milun was born in South Wales.
From the day he was dubbed knight
10 he couldn't find a single opponent
who could knock him off his horse.
He certainly was a good knight:
generous and strong, courteous and proud.
He won fame in Ireland,
15 in Norway and Gothland;
in Logres and in Albany¹
many envied him.
He was well beloved
and honored by many princes.
20 There was a baron in his country—
I don't know his name—
who had a daughter,
a beautiful and most refined girl.
She had heard of Milun,
25 and began to love him.
She sent a messenger to him,
to say that, if it pleased him, she would love him.
Milun was happy with the news,
and thanked the girl;
30 he willingly granted her his love,

and said he would never leave her;
his response to her was very courtly,
and he gave rich gifts to the messenger,
promising him his friendship.
35 "My friend," he said, "please undertake
to help me speak to my beloved
and to keep our communications secret.
Carry my gold ring to her
and tell her on my behalf:
40 whenever she wants, she can send you for me
and I'll go with you."
The messenger took his leave and soon went away;
he returned to his lady.
He gave her the ring and told her
45 that he had done what she had asked.
The girl was delighted
at the love she was being offered.
Outside her room, in a grove
where she went to amuse herself,
50 she and Milun, very often,
had a rendezvous.
Milun came there so often and loved her so much
that the girl became pregnant.
When she realized this,
55 she sent for Milun and made her lament.
She told him what had happened;
she had lost her honor and her good name
when she got herself into this situation.
She would be grievously punished:
60 tortured by the sword
or sold into slavery in another land.
Such were the ancient customs
observed in those days.
Milun answered that he would do
65 whatever she counseled.
"When the child is born," she said,

“you must bring him to my sister,
who is married and living in Northumbria;²
she is a rich woman, worthy and prudent.
70 And send word to her, in writing
and also orally
that this child belongs to her sister,
who has endured great grief because of him.
She should make sure that he’s well nourished,
75 whatever it may be, son or daughter.
I shall hang your ring around his neck
and send a letter with it,
in which will be written his father’s name
and the unfortunate story of his mother.
80 When he is full grown,
and has arrived at the age
when he can listen to reason,
she should give him the ring and the letter
and command him to keep them
85 so that he can find his father.”
They abided by this plan,
and the time eventually came
for the girl to have her baby.
An old woman who watched over her,
90 to whom she had disclosed her entire situation,
covered things up so well
that she was never discovered,
by her words or appearance.
The girl had a beautiful son.
95 They hung the ring around his neck,
and also a silken wallet
with the letter in it, so that no one could see it.
Then they laid the child in a little cradle,
wrapped in a white linen cloth;
100 beneath his head
they placed a fine pillow

and over him a coverlet,
hemmed all around with marten fur.
The old nurse gave him to Milun,
105 who was waiting for her in the grove.
He turned the child over to some trustworthy
retainers
who would take him to his destination.
As they traveled from town to town,
they stopped to rest seven times a day;
110 they had the child nursed,
changed, and bathed.
They took their job so seriously
that they had brought a wet nurse with them.
They stayed on the right road
115 until they reached the sister and gave the child to
her.
She took him from them, and was very pleased with
him.
She also took the letter with its seal.
When she knew who he was,
she cherished him even more.
120 Then the men who had brought the child
returned to their own land.
Milun left his homeland
to seek honor through martial exploits.
His mistress remained at home
125 and her father gave her in marriage
to a rich lord of the region,
a powerful man of great repute.
When she found out about this turn of events,
she was grief-stricken,
130 and she cried for Milun.
She was especially worried about being blamed
for having had a child already;
her husband would discover that soon enough.
"Alas," she said, "what can I do?"

135 Must I be married? How can I?
I'm no longer a virgin,
I'll have to be a servant all my life.
I didn't know it would be like this;
rather, I thought I could have my love,
140 that we could keep it a secret between us,
that I'd never hear it bruited about.
Now I'd rather die than live,
but I'm not even free to do that,
since I have guardians all around me,
145 old and young; my chamberlains,
who hate a noble love,
and take their delight in sadness.
Now I have to suffer like this—
if only I could die!"
150 The time came for her to be married,
and her father led her to the altar.
Milun came back to his land;
he was sad and upset—
he gave himself up to grief.
155 He took some comfort from the fact
that the one he loved so much
was still in her country, nearby.
Milun undertook to plan
how he could send word to her—
160 without being discovered—
that he had come home.
He wrote a letter and sealed it.
He had a swan of which he was very fond;
he tied the letter to its neck,
165 hid it among the feathers.
He summoned one of his squires
and made him his messenger.
"Go immediately and change your clothes," he said.
"I want you to go to my mistress' castle,
170 and take my swan with you.

Make arrangements
for the swan to be given to her
by a servant or a maid.”
The squire did his duty.
175 He went off quickly, taking the swan with him;
by the most direct route he knew
he came to the castle.
He went through the village
directly to the main gate,
180 called out to the porter:
“Friend,” he said, “listen!
This is how I make a living:
I go around catching birds.
In a meadow outside Caerleon³
185 I captured a swan in my net.
To earn her goodwill and support,
I want to make a present of it to the lady of the
castle,
so that I won’t be bothered
while I’m working in this area.”
190 The porter replied,
“Friend, no one can speak to her;
but nonetheless, I’ll go find out:
if I can find a place
that I can bring you to,
195 I’ll arrange for you to speak with her.”
The porter went to the main hall
and found only two knights there,
seated at a big table
amusing themselves at chess.
200 Quickly he returned to the messenger,
and brought him in in such a way
that he wasn’t seen
or disturbed by anyone.
He came to the lady’s chamber, and called;
205

a girl opened the door for them.
They came into the lady's presence,
presented her with the swan.
She called one of her valets
and said to him, "Make it your business
210 to take good care of my swan;
be sure he has enough food."
"My lady," said the messenger who brought the
swan,
"No one but you should have him;
this is indeed a royal present—
215 see how fine and handsome a bird he is!"
He placed the bird in her hands.
She accepted it quite willingly,
petted its neck and head,
and felt the letter among the feathers.
220 Her blood ran cold; she shivered,
realizing the letter was from her lover.
She had some money given to the messenger,
and told him to go.
When the chamber was empty
225 she called one of her maids.
She detached the letter,
broke the seal.
She read at the top of the sheet, "Milun,"
and when she saw her lover's name
230 she kissed it a hundred times, crying,
before she could read further.
At the beginning of the letter she read
what he had written
of the great sadness
235 from which he was suffering night and day.
Now it was entirely in her power
to kill or cure him.
If she could think of a scheme
whereby he could speak with her,

240 she should let him know in a letter
and send the swan back to him.
First she should have the swan well guarded,
then keep him fasting
three days without any food.
245 Then the letter should be hung on his neck,
and he should be released; he would fly
to where he had formerly lived.
When she had looked at the whole letter,
and heard the contents,
250 she had the swan well taken care of
with abundant food and drink;
she kept him in her chamber for a month.
Now listen to what happened!
She used her ingenuity so well
255 that she obtained some ink and parchment;
she wrote the letter she wanted to,
and sealed it with a ring.
Then she made the swan go hungry,
hung the letter on his neck, released him.
260 The bird was famished—
he really wanted food;
so he quickly returned
to where he had come from—
the same town, the same household—
265 there he landed at Milun's feet.
When Milun saw him, he was very joyful;
he quickly grabbed him by the wings,
he called his steward,
had him give the swan some food,
270 and meanwhile took the letter from his neck.
He read it from one end to the other,
noting all the words that he found in it,
and rejoicing at her message:
"She couldn't have any pleasure without him,
275 and now he should send back his feelings to her,

by the swan, the same way she had done."
He'll do that right away!
For twenty years they lived like this,
Milun and his mistress.
280 The swan was their messenger,
they had no other means of communication,
and they always made him fast
before they let him go on his errand;
whoever the bird came to,
285 you can be sure, fed it well.
They met together several times.
(No one can be so constrained
or so closely guarded
that he can't find a way out.)
290 Meanwhile, the lady who had raised their son
had him dubbed a knight;
he had been with her long enough
to come of age.
He had become a fine young man.
295 She gave him the letter and the ring,
told him who his mother was,
and his father's story as well:
how his father was a good knight,
so bold, hardy, and proud
300 that there was none who exceeded him
in worth or valor anywhere.
When the lady had told him all this
and he'd listened carefully to her,
he rejoiced in his father's virtues;
305 he was delighted with what he had learned.
He said to himself,
"A man oughtn't to think he's worth much,
being born in such a manner
and having such a famous father,
310 if he doesn't seek out even greater renown
away from home, in foreign lands."

He had everything he needed;
he didn't stay beyond that night,
but took his leave next morning.
315 His foster mother admonished him,
urging him to do good deeds;
she also gave him plenty of money.
He went to Southampton to get under way;
as quickly as he could he set out to sea.
320 He arrived at Barfleur
and went right to Brittany.⁴
There he spent lavishly and tourneyed,
and became acquainted with rich men.
In every joust he entered,
325 he was judged the best combatant.
He loved poor knights;
what he gained from rich ones
he gave to them and thus retained them in his
service;
he was generous in all his spending.
330 He would never willingly stay long in one place;
in all those foreign lands
he won renown for his heroic virtues.
He also excelled in refined and honorable behavior.
Because of his excellence and fame
335 the news spread to his own country
that a young knight of that land,
who had gone abroad to seek honor,
had so excelled in prowess,
goodness, and generosity
340 that those who didn't know his name
called him, everywhere, "the knight without equal."
Milun heard this stranger praised
and his virtues recounted.
He was saddened, and complained to himself
345 about this knight who was worth so much

that, so long as he traveled,
fought in tournaments, and bore arms,
no one else born in that land
would be praised or honored.
350 Milun came to a decision:
he would quickly cross the sea
and joust with this knight,
in order to do some harm to him and his reputation.
Anger spurred him on
355 to try to unhorse the knight—
that would put him to shame!
Then he would go look for his son
who had left the country;
Milun did not know what had become of him.
360 He let his mistress know his scheme,
and asked her leave to go;
he revealed his intentions
by sending her a sealed letter,
by the swan, I believe;
365 now she had to let him know how she felt.
When she heard his wish,
she thanked him, expressing her gratitude
that he wanted to leave the country
to find their son,
370 and to find out about his fortunes;
she wouldn't interfere with his plans.
Milun got her message,
then dressed himself richly
and went over to Normandy,
375 whence he traveled to Brittany.
He made many acquaintances,
sought out many tournaments;
his lodgings were usually luxurious,
and he gave suitably generous gifts.
380 Through an entire winter, I believe,
Milun stayed in that land.

He obtained the services of many good knights,
until Easter came,
when tournaments began again,
385 as well as wars and other battles.⁵
A tournament was held at Mont Saint Michel;⁶
Normans and Bretons,
Flemings and Frenchmen all came,
390 though there were few English knights.⁷
Milun came early,
good knight that he was.
He inquired after the knight without equal;
there were plenty of knights who could tell him
where he had come from.
395 By his arms and shield
he was pointed out to Milun,
who observed him carefully.
The tournament began.
Whoever wanted to joust quickly found the
400 opportunity;
he need only search the ranks a bit
to find a companion
in the quest for victory or defeat.
This much I'll tell you about Milun:
it went very well with him in combat
405 and he was highly praised that day.
But the young man of whom I've told you—
he was acclaimed beyond all others;
none could equal him
in tourneying and jousting.
410 Milun watched him perform,
riding and attacking so well;
although he was Milun's rival,
he pleased Milun greatly.
Milun rushed into the ranks against him,
415 and the two jousted together.

Milun struck him so hard
that his lance splintered,
but he didn't unhorse him.
The other knight struck Milun so hard
420 that he knocked him right off his steed.
Beneath Milun's visor,
he saw his beard and white hair;
he was sorry to have made him fall.
He took Milun's horse by the reins,
425 and presented it to him,
saying, "My lord, remount;
I'm saddened
that I should have so humiliated
a man of your age."
430 Milun leaped up, highly pleased,
for he had recognized the ring on the other's finger
when he gave Milun his horse.
He spoke to the young man.
"My friend," he said, "listen to me!
435 For the love of almighty God
tell me your father's name!
What is yours? Who is your mother?
I want to know the truth about this.
I've seen a lot, wandered a lot,
440 searched in many lands
in tournaments and wars;
I never once fell from my war-horse
because of a blow from another knight.
You knocked me down in a joust—
445 I could love you a great deal."
The other answered, "I'll tell you
about my father, as much as I know of him.
I think he was born in Wales
and is named Milun.
450 He loved the daughter of a rich man
and secretly conceived me with her.

I was sent to Northumbria,
and there I was raised and educated
by my aunt.
455 She kept me with her,
then gave me a horse and my arms,
and sent me to this land,
where I have long resided.
It is my desire and intent
460 to go back across the sea quickly
and return to my own land;
I wish to find out who my father is,
and how he is behaving toward my mother.
I'll show him my gold ring
465 and tell him my story;
he will certainly not reject me,
rather, as a loving father he'll make much of me."
When Milun heard him say all this
he didn't wait to hear any more;
470 he quickly leapt forward
and took the other by the skirt of his hauberk.⁸
"God!" he cried, "I'm a new man!
By my faith, friend, you are my son!
It was to look for you
475 that I left my homeland this year."
When the young knight heard him, he got down
from his horse
and kissed his father warmly.
They both looked so happy
and said such things to each other
480 that all the others watching them
began to cry from joy and pity.
When the tournament broke up,
Milun went away, very anxious
to speak at leisure with his son,
485 to find out what his pleasure was.

They spent the night in a hostel
where there was much celebrating
being done by a large number of knights.
Milun told his son
490 how he loved the boy's mother,
and how her father had given her
to a baron of that region,
and how he had continued loving her,
and she him, with all her heart,
495 and how he used the swan as a messenger,
having the bird carry his letters,
since he couldn't trust anyone else.
The son responded, "Indeed, my good father,
I'll bring you and my mother together;
500 I shall kill her husband
and see you married."
They spoke no more about it;
the next day they made ready to leave.
They said good-bye to their friends,
505 and returned to their own land.
Their crossing was speedy,
thanks to a good strong wind.
As they went on their way
they met a boy
510 coming from Milun's mistress;
he was on his way to Brittany,
for she had dispatched him to go there.
Now his trip was shortened.
She was sending Milun a sealed letter
515 with a message telling him
that he should come to her without delay:
her husband was dead—now was the time to make
haste!
Milun heard the news,
and it seemed wonderful to him.
520 Then he told his son.

Nothing held them back now;
they pushed on until they came
to the lady's castle.
525 She was delighted with her son,
who was so worthy and well behaved.
Without consulting any relatives,
with no advice from anyone else,
their son brought them together,
530 gave his mother to his father.
In great happiness and well-being
they lived happily ever after.

The ancients made a *lai*
about their love and good fortune;
and I who have put it down in writing
535 have thoroughly enjoyed retelling it.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Albany is another name for Scotland; Logres, for England. Gothland is the southern part of what is now Sweden. *Milun* is concerned throughout with geographic specificity.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Region composed of what is now northern England and southeast Scotland.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A Welsh town.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Milun sails from the port city of Southampton, on England's south coast, to Barfleur, in what is now Normandy, France. From there, he heads southeast to Brittany.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: During the Middle Ages, the Church prohibited warfare and tournaments during Lent, the forty days of repentance before Easter.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: On the French coast between Normandy and Brittany.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Most of the knights are from northern continental Europe. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Chainmail tunic. [Return to reference 8](#)

Lanval

I shall tell you the adventure of another *lai*,
just as it happened:
it was composed about a very noble vassal;
in Breton, they call him Lanval.

5 Arthur, the brave and the courtly king,
was staying at Cardoel,
because the Scots and the Picts
were destroying the land.
They invaded Logres
and laid it waste.¹
10 At Pentecost,² in summer,
the king stayed there.
He gave out many rich gifts:
to counts and barons,
members of the Round Table—
15 such a company had no equal in all the world—
he distributed wives and lands,
to all but one who had served him.
That was Lanval; Arthur forgot him,
and none of his men favored him either.
20 For his valor, for his generosity,
his beauty and his bravery,
most men envied him;
some feigned the appearance of love
who, if something unpleasant happened to him,
25 would not have been at all disturbed.
He was the son of a king of high degree
but he was far from his heritage.
He was of the king's household
but he had spent all his wealth,

30 for the king gave him nothing
nor did Lanval ask.
Now Lanval was in difficulty,
depressed and very worried.
35 My lords, don't be surprised:
a strange man, without friends,
is very sad in another land,
when he doesn't know where to look for help.
The knight of whom I speak,
40 who had served the king so long,
one day mounted his horse
and went off to amuse himself.
He left the city
and came, all alone, to a field;
45 he dismounted by a running stream
but his horse trembled badly.
He removed the saddle and went off,
leaving the horse to roll around in the meadow.
He folded his cloak beneath his head
and lay down.
50 He worried about his difficulty,
he could see nothing that pleased him.
As he lay there
he looked down along the bank
and saw two girls approaching;
55 he had never seen any lovelier.
They were richly dressed,
tightly laced,
in tunics of dark purple;
their faces were very lovely.
60 The older one carried basins,
golden, well made, and fine;
I shall tell you the truth about it, without fail.
The other carried a towel.
They went straight
65 to where the knight was lying.

Lanval, who was very well bred,
got up to meet them.
They greeted him first
and gave him their message:
70 "Sir Lanval, my lady,
who is worthy and wise and beautiful,
sent us for you.
Come with us now.
We shall guide you there safely.
75 See, her pavilion is nearby!"
The knight went with them;
giving no thought to his horse
who was feeding before him in the meadow.
They led him up to the tent,
80 which was quite beautiful and well placed.
Queen Semiramis,³
however much more wealth,
power, or knowledge she had,
or the emperor Octavian⁴
85 could not have paid for one of the flaps.
There was a golden eagle on top of it,
whose value I could not tell,
nor could I judge the value of the cords or the poles
that held up the sides of the tent;
90 there is no king on earth who could buy it,
no matter what wealth he offered.
The girl was inside the tent:
the lily and the young rose
when they appear in the summer
95 are surpassed by her beauty.
She lay on a beautiful bed—
the bedclothes were worth a castle—
dressed only in her shift.
Her body was well shaped and elegant;
100 for the heat, she had thrown over herself,

a precious cloak of white ermine,
covered with purple alexandrine,
but her whole side was uncovered,
her face, her neck and her bosom;
105 she was whiter than the hawthorn flower.
The knight went forward
and the girl addressed him.
He sat before the bed.
"Lanval," she said, "sweet love,
110 because of you I have come from my land;
I came to seek you from far away.
If you are brave and courtly,
no emperor or count or king
will ever have known such joy or good;
115 for I love you more than anything."
He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful;
Love stung him with a spark
that burned and set fire to his heart.
He answered her in a suitable way.
120 "Lovely one," he said, "if it pleased you,
if such joy might be mine
that you would love me,
there is nothing you might command,
within my power, that I would not do,
125 whether foolish or wise.
I shall obey your command;
for you, I shall abandon everyone.
I want never to leave you.
That is what I most desire."
130 When the girl heard the words
of the man who could love her so,
she granted him her love and her body.
Now Lanval was on the right road!
Afterward, she gave him a gift:
135 he would never again want anything,
he would receive as he desired;

however generously he might give and spend,
she would provide what he needed.
Now Lanval is well cared for.
140 The more lavishly he spends,
the more gold and silver he will have.
"Love," she said, "I admonish you now,
I command and beg you,
do not let any man know about this.
145 I shall tell you why:
you would lose me for good
if this love were known;
you would never see me again
or possess my body."
150 He answered that he would do
exactly as she commanded.
He lay beside her on the bed;
now Lanval is well cared for.
He remained with her
155 that afternoon, until evening
and would have stayed longer, if he could,
and if his love had consented.
"Love," she said, "get up.
You cannot stay any longer.
160 Go away now; I shall remain
but I will tell you one thing:
when you want to talk to me
there is no place you can think of
where a man might have his mistress
165 without reproach or shame,
that I shall not be there with you
to satisfy all your desires.
No man but you will see me
or hear my words."
170 When he heard her, he was very happy,
he kissed her, and then got up.
The girls who had brought him to the tent

dressed him in rich clothes;
when he was dressed anew,
175 there wasn't a more handsome youth in all the
world;
he was no fool, no boor.
They gave him water for his hands
and a towel to dry them,
and they brought him food.
180 He took supper with his love;
it was not to be refused.
He was served with great courtesy,
he received it with great joy.
There was an entremet⁵
185 that vastly pleased the knight
for he kissed his lady often
and held her close.
When they finished dinner,
his horse was brought to him.
190 The horse had been well saddled;
Lanval was very richly served.
The knight took his leave, mounted,
and rode toward the city,
often looking behind him.
195 Lanval was very disturbed;
he wondered about his adventure
and was doubtful in his heart;
he was amazed, not knowing what to believe;
he didn't expect ever to see her again.
200 He came to his lodging
and found his men well dressed.
That night, his accommodations were rich
but no one knew where it came from.
There was no knight in the city
205 who really needed a place to stay
whom he didn't invite to join him

to be well and richly served.
Lanval gave rich gifts,
Lanval released prisoners,
210 Lanval dressed jongleurs,⁶
Lanval offered great honors.
There was no stranger or friend
to whom Lanval didn't give.
Lanval's joy and pleasure were intense;
215 in the daytime or at night,
he could see his love often;
she was completely at his command.

In that same year, it seems to me,
after the feast of St. John,⁷
220 about thirty knights
were amusing themselves
in an orchard beneath the tower
where the queen⁸ was staying.
Gawain was with them
225 and his cousin, the handsome Yvain;
Gawain, the noble, the brave,
who was so loved by all, said:
"By God, my lords, we wronged
our companion Lanval,
230 who is so generous and courtly,
and whose father is a rich king,
when we didn't bring him with us."
They immediately turned back,
went to his lodging
235 and prevailed on Lanval to come along with them.
At a sculpted window
the queen was looking out;
she had three ladies with her.
She saw the king's retinue,
240 recognized Lanval and looked at him.

Then she told one of her ladies
to send for her maidens,
the loveliest and the most refined;
together they went to amuse themselves
245 in the orchard where the others were.
She brought thirty or more with her;
they descended the steps.
The knights came to meet them,
because they were delighted to see them.
250 The knights took them by the hand;
their conversation was in no way vulgar.
Lanval went off to one side,
far from the others; he was impatient
to hold his love,
255 to kiss and embrace and touch her;
he thought little of others' joys
if he could not have his pleasure.
When the queen saw him alone,
she went straight to the knight.
260 She sat beside him and spoke,
revealing her whole heart:
"Lanval, I have shown you much honor,
I have cherished you, and loved you.
You may have all my love;
265 just tell me your desire.
I promise you my affection.
You should be very happy with me."
"My lady," he said, "let me be!
I have no desire to love you.
270 I've served the king a long time;
I don't want to betray my faith to him.
Never, for you or for your love,
will I do anything to harm my lord."
The queen got angry;
275 in her wrath, she insulted him:
"Lanval," she said, "I am sure

you don't care for such pleasure;
people have often told me
that you have no interest in women.
280 You have fine-looking boys
with whom you enjoy yourself.
Base coward, lousy cripple,
my lord made a bad mistake
when he let you stay with him.
285 For all I know, he'll lose God because of it."
When Lanval heard her, he was quite disturbed;
he was not slow to answer.
He said something out of spite
that he would later regret.
290 "Lady," he said, "of that activity
I know nothing,
but I love and I am loved
by one who should have the prize
over all the women I know.
295 And I shall tell you one thing;
you might as well know all:
any one of those who serve her,
the poorest girl of all,
is better than you, my lady queen,
300 in body, face, and beauty,
in breeding and in goodness."
The queen left him
and went, weeping, to her chamber.
She was upset and angry
305 because he had insulted her.
She went to bed sick;
never, she said, would she get up
unless the king gave her satisfaction
for the offense against her.
310 The king returned from the woods,
he'd had a very good day.
He entered the queen's chambers.

When she saw him, she began to complain.
315 She fell at his feet, asked his mercy,
saying that Lanval had dishonored her;
he had asked for her love,
and because she refused him
he insulted and offended her:
he boasted of a love
320 who was so refined and noble and proud
that her chambermaid,
the poorest one who served her,
was better than the queen.
The king got very angry;
325 he swore an oath:
if Lanval could not defend himself in court
he would have him burned or hanged.
The king left her chamber
and called for three of his barons;
330 he sent them for Lanval
who was feeling great sorrow and distress.
He had come back to his dwelling,
knowing very well
that he'd lost his love,
335 he had betrayed their affair.
He was all alone in a room,
disturbed and troubled;
he called on his love, again and again,
but it did him no good.
340 He complained and sighed,
from time to time he fainted;
then he cried a hundred times for her to have mercy
and speak to her love.
He cursed his heart and his mouth;
345 it's a wonder he didn't kill himself.
No matter how much he cried and shouted,
ranted and raged,
she would not have mercy on him,

not even let him see her.
350 How will he ever contain himself?
The men the king sent
arrived and told him
to appear in court without delay:
the king had summoned him
355 because the queen had accused him.
Lanval went with his great sorrow;
they could have killed him, for all he cared.
He came before the king;
he was very sad, thoughtful, silent;
360 his face revealed great suffering.
In anger the king told him:
"Vassal, you have done me a great wrong!
This was a base undertaking,
to shame and disgrace me
365 and to insult the queen.
You have made a foolish boast:
your love is much too noble
if her maid is more beautiful,
more worthy, than the queen."
370 Lanval denied that he'd dishonored
or shamed his lord,
word for word, as the king spoke:
he had not made advances to the queen;
but of what he had said,
375 he acknowledged the truth,
about the love he had boasted of,
that now made him sad because he'd lost her.
About that he said he would do
whatever the court decided.
380 The king was very angry with him;
he sent for all his men
to determine exactly what he ought to do
so that no one could find fault with his decision.
They did as he commanded,

whether they liked it or not.
385 They assembled,
judged, and decided,
that Lanval should have his day;
but he must find pledges⁹ for his lord
390 to guarantee that he would await the judgment,
return, and be present at it.
Then the court would be increased,
for now there were none but the king's household.
The barons came back to the king
395 and announced their decision.
The king demanded pledges.
Lanval was alone and forlorn,
he had no relative, no friend.
Gawain went and pledged himself for him,
400 and all his companions followed.
The king addressed them: "I release him to you
on forfeit of whatever you hold from me,
lands and fiefs, each one for himself."
When Lanval was pledged, there was nothing else to
405 do.
He returned to his lodging.
The knights accompanied him,
they reproached and admonished him
that he give up his great sorrow;
they cursed his foolish love.
410 Each day they went to see him,
because they wanted to know
whether he was drinking and eating;
they were afraid that he'd kill himself.
On the day that they had named,
415 the barons assembled.
The king and the queen were there
and the pledges brought Lanval back.
They were all very sad for him:

420 I think there were a hundred
who would have done all they could
to set him free without a trial
where he would be wrongly accused.
The king demanded a verdict
according to the charge and rebuttal.
425 Now it all fell to the barons.
They went to the judgment,
worried and distressed
for the noble man from another land
who'd gotten into such trouble in their midst.
430 Many wanted to condemn him
in order to satisfy their lord.
The Duke of Cornwall said:
"No one can blame us;
whether it makes you weep or sing
435 justice must be carried out.
The king spoke against his vassal
whom I have heard named Lanval;
he accused him of felony,
charged him with a misdeed—
440 a love that he had boasted of,
which made the queen angry.
No one but the king accused him:
by the faith I owe you,
if one were to speak the truth,
445 there should have been no need for defense,
except that a man owes his lord honor
in every circumstance.
He will be bound by his oath,
and the king will forgive us our pledges
450 if he can produce proof;
if his love would come forward,
if what he said,
what upset the queen, is true,
then he will be acquitted,

because he did not say it out of malice.
455 But if he cannot get his proof,
we must make it clear to him
that he will forfeit his service to the king;
he must take his leave.”
460 They sent to the knight,
told and announced to him
that he should have his love come
to defend and stand surety¹ for him.
He told them that he could not do it:
465 he would never receive help from her.
They went back to the judges,
not expecting any help from Lanval.
The king pressed them hard
because of the queen who was waiting.
470 When they were ready to give their verdict
they saw two girls approaching,
riding handsome palfreys.
They were very attractive,
dressed in purple taffeta,
475 over their bare skin.
The men looked at them with pleasure.
Gawain, taking three knights with him,
went to Lanval and told him;
he pointed out the two girls.
480 Gawain was extremely happy, and begged him
to tell if his love were one of them.
Lanval said he didn't know who they were,
where they came from or where they were going.
The girls proceeded
485 still on horseback;
they dismounted before the high table
at which Arthur, the king, sat.
They were of great beauty,
and spoke in a courtly manner:
490

“King, clear your chambers,
have them hung with silk
where my lady may dismount;
she wishes to take shelter with you.”
He promised it willingly
495 and called two knights
to guide them up to the chambers.
On that subject no more was said.
The king asked his barons
for their judgment and decision;
500 he said they had angered him very much
with their long delay.
“Sire,” they said, “we have decided.
Because of the ladies we have just seen
we have made no judgment.
505 Let us reconvene the trial.”
Then they assembled, everyone was worried;
there was much noise and strife.
While they were in that confusion,
two girls in noble array,
510 dressed in Phrygian silks
and riding Spanish mules,
were seen coming down the street.
This gave the vassals great joy;
to each other they said that now
515 Lanval, the brave and bold, was saved.
Gawain went up to him,
bringing his companions along.
“Sire,” he said, “take heart.
For the love of God, speak to us.
520 Here come two maidens,
well adorned and very beautiful;
one must certainly be your love.”
Lanval answered quickly
that he did not recognize them,
525 he didn’t know them or love them.

Meanwhile they'd arrived,
and dismounted before the king.
Most of those who saw them praised them
for their bodies, their faces, their coloring;
530 each was more impressive
than the queen had ever been.
The older one was courtly and wise,
she spoke her message fittingly:
535 "King, have chambers prepared for us
to lodge my lady according to her need;
she is coming here to speak with you."
He ordered them to be taken
to the others who had preceded them.
540 There was no problem with the mules.
When he had seen to the girls,
he summoned all his barons
to render their judgment;
it had already dragged out too much.
545 The queen was getting angry
because she had waited so long.
They were about to give their judgment
when through the city came riding
a girl on horseback:
550 there was none more beautiful in the world.
She rode a white palfrey,
who carried her handsomely and smoothly:
he was well apportioned in the neck and head,
no finer beast in the world.
555 The palfrey's trappings were rich;
under heaven there was no count or king
who could have afforded them all
without selling or mortgaging lands.
She was dressed in this fashion:
560 in a white linen shift
that revealed both her sides
since the lacing was along the side.

Her body was elegant, her hips slim,
her neck whiter than snow on a branch,
her eyes bright, her face white,
565 a beautiful mouth, a well-set nose,
dark eyebrows and an elegant forehead,
her hair curly and rather blond;
golden wire does not shine
like her hair in the light.
570 Her cloak, which she had wrapped around her,
was dark purple.
On her wrist she held a sparrow hawk,²
a greyhound followed her.
In the town, no one, small or big,
575 old man or child,
failed to come look.
As they watched her pass,
there was no joking about her beauty.
She proceeded at a slow pace.
580 The judges who saw her
marveled at the sight;
no one who looked at her
was not warmed with joy.
Those who loved the knight
585 came to him and told him
of the girl who was approaching,
if God pleased, to rescue him.
"Sir companion, here comes one
neither tawny nor dark;
590 this is, of all who exist,
the most beautiful woman in the world."
Lanval heard them and lifted his head;
he recognized her and sighed.
The blood rose to his face;
595 he was quick to speak.
"By my faith," he said, "that is my love.

Now I don't care if I am killed,
if only she forgives me.
For I am restored, now that I see her."
600 The lady entered the palace;
no one so beautiful had ever been there.
She dismounted before the king
so that she was well seen by all.
And she let her cloak fall
605 so they could see her better.
The king, who was well bred,
rose and went to meet her;
all the others honored her
and offered to serve her.
610 When they had looked at her well,
when they had greatly praised her beauty,
she spoke in this way,
she didn't want to wait:
"I have loved one of your vassals:
615 you see him before you—Lanval.
He has been accused in your court—
I don't want him to suffer
for what he said; you should know
that the queen was in the wrong.
620 He never made advances to her.
And for the boast that he made,
if he can be acquitted through me.
let him be set free by your barons."
Whatever the barons judged by law
625 the king promised would prevail.
To the last man they agreed
that Lanval had successfully answered the charge.
He was set free by their decision
and the girl departed.
630 The king could not detain her,
though there were enough people to serve her.
Outside the hall stood

635 a great stone of dark marble
where heavy men mounted
when they left the king's court;
Lanval climbed on it.
When the girl came through the gate
Lanval leapt, in one bound,
640 onto the palfrey, behind her.
With her he went to Avalun,³
so the Bretons tell us,
to a very beautiful island;
there the youth was carried off.
645 No man heard of him again,
and I have no more to tell.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Arthur convenes his court in Wales, at Cardoel, to avoid the Scottish forces raiding England ("Logres").[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Christian holiday of Pentecost, which occurs fifty days after Easter, is frequently the starting point for Arthurian adventures.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Legendary Babylonian queen.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: First Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar (ruled 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Small, exquisite dish served between courses in a feast.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Traveling entertainers.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In late June.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Queen Guinevere.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Knights to stake their own status and holdings to guarantee Lanval's obedience to the trial.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Be legally responsible.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A small bird of prey, which can be trained to hunt.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Legendary island in Arthurian lore.[Return to reference 3](#)

Laüstic

I shall tell you an adventure
about which the Bretons made a *lai*.
Laüstic was the name, I think,
they gave it in their land.
In French it is *rossignol*,
5 and *nightingale* in proper English.
At Saint-Malo, ¹ in that country,
there was a famous city.
Two knights lived there,
they both had strong houses.
10 From the goodness of the two barons
the city acquired a good name.
One had married a woman
wise, courtly, and handsome;
she set a wonderfully high value on herself,
15 within the bounds of custom and usage.
The other was a bachelor,
well known among his peers
for bravery and great valor;
he delighted in living well.
20 He jousted often, spent widely
and gave out what he had.
He also loved his neighbor's wife;
he asked her, begged her so persistently,
and there was such good in him,
25 that she loved him more than anything,
as much for the good that she heard of him
as because he was close by.
They loved each other discreetly and well,
concealed themselves and took care
30 that they weren't seen

or disturbed or suspected.
And they could do this well enough
since their dwellings were close,
their houses were next door,
35 and so were their rooms and their towers;
there was no barrier or boundary
except a high wall of dark stone.
From the rooms where the lady slept,
if she went to the window
40 she could talk to her love
on the other side, and he to her,
and they could exchange their possessions,
by tossing and throwing them.
There was scarcely anything to disturb them,
45 they were both quite at ease;
except that they couldn't come together
completely for their pleasure,
for the lady was closely guarded
when her husband was in the country.
50 Yet they always managed,
whether at night or in the day,
to be able to talk together;
no one could prevent
their coming to the window
55 and seeing each other there.
For a long time they loved each other,
until one summer
when the woods and meadows were green
and the orchards blooming.
60 The little birds, with great sweetness,
were voicing their joy above the flowers.
It is no wonder if he understands them,
he who has love to his desire.
I'll tell you the truth about the knight:
65 he listened to them intently
and to the lady on the other side,

both with words and looks.
At night, when the moon shone
when her lord was in bed,
70 she often rose from his side
and wrapped herself in a cloak.
She went to the window
because of her lover, who, she knew,
was leading the same life,
75 awake most of the night.
Each took pleasure in the other's sight
since they could have nothing more;
but she got up and stood there so often
that her lord grew angry
80 and began to question her, to ask
why she got up and where she went.
"My lord," the lady answered him,
"there is no joy in this world
like hearing the nightingale sing.
85 That's why I stand there.
It sounds so sweet at night
that it gives me great pleasure;
it delights me so and I so desire it
that I cannot close my eyes."
90 When her lord heard what she said
he laughed in anger and ill will.
He set his mind on one thing:
to trap the nightingale.
There was no valet in his house
95 that he didn't set to making traps, nets, or snares,
which he then had placed in the orchard;
there was no hazel tree or chestnut
where they did not place a snare or lime²
until they trapped and captured him.
100 When they had caught the nightingale,
they brought it, still alive, to the lord.

He was very happy when he had it;
he came to the lady's chambers.
"Lady," he said, "where are you?
105 Come here! Speak to us!
I have trapped the nightingale
that kept you awake so much.
From now on you can lie in peace:
he will never again awaken you."
110 When the lady heard him,
she was sad and angry.
She asked her lord for the bird
but he killed it out of spite,
he broke its neck in his hands—
115 too vicious an act—
and threw the body on the lady;
her shift was stained with blood,
a little, on her breast.
Then he left the room.
120 The lady took the little body;
she wept hard and cursed
those who betrayed the nightingale,
who made the traps and snares,
for they took great joy from her.
125 "Alas," she said, "now I must suffer.
I won't be able to get up at night
or go and stand in the window
where I used to see my love.
I know one thing for certain:
130 he'd think I was pretending.
I must decide what to do about this.
I shall send him the nightingale
and relate the adventure."
135 In a piece of samite,³
embroidered in gold and writing,
she wrapped the little bird.

She called one of her servants,
charged him with her message,
and sent him to her love.
140 He came to the knight,
greeted him in the name of the lady,
related the whole message to him,
and presented the nightingale.

145 When everything had been told and revealed to the
knight,
after he had listened well,
he was very sad about the adventure,
but he wasn't mean or hesitant.
He had a small vessel fashioned,
150 with no iron or steel in it;
it was all pure gold and good stones,
very precious and very dear;
the cover was very carefully attached.
He placed the nightingale inside
and then he had the casket sealed—
155 he carried it with him always.

This adventure was told,
it could not be concealed for long.
The Bretons made a *lai* about it
which men call *The Nightingale*.
160

Endnotes

- Note 1: A port city in Brittany.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Sticky substance spread on branches to trap small birds.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Heavy, luxurious silk fabric.[Return to reference 3](#)

Chevrefoil

I should like very much
to tell you the truth
about the *lai* men call *Chevrefoil*¹—
why it was composed and where it came from.
5 Many have told and recited it to me
and I have found it in writing,
about Tristan and the queen²
and their love that was so true,
that brought them much suffering
and caused them to die the same day.
10 King Mark was annoyed,
angry at his nephew Tristan;
he exiled Tristan from his land
because of the queen whom he loved.
Tristan returned to his own country,
15 South Wales, where he was born,
he stayed a whole year;
he couldn't come back.
Afterward he began to expose himself
to death and destruction.
20 Don't be surprised at this:
for one who loves very faithfully
is sad and troubled
when he cannot satisfy his desires.
Tristan was sad and worried,
25 so he set out from his land.
He traveled straight to Cornwall,
where the queen lived,
and entered the forest all alone—
he didn't want anyone to see him;
30 he came out only in the evening

when it was time to find shelter.
He took lodging that night,
with peasants, poor people.
He asked them for news
35 of the king—what he was doing.
They told him they had heard
that the barons had been summoned by ban.³
They were to come to Tintagel⁴
where the king wanted to hold his court;
40 at Pentecost they would all be there,
there'd be much joy and pleasure,
and the queen would be there too.
Tristan heard and was very happy;
she would not be able to go there
45 without his seeing her pass.
The day the king set out,
Tristan also came to the woods
by the road he knew
their assembly must take.
50 He cut a hazel tree in half,
then he squared it.
When he had prepared the wood,
he wrote his name on it with his knife.
If the queen noticed it—
55 and she should be on the watch for it,
for it had happened before
and she had noticed it then—
she'd know when she saw it,
that the piece of wood had come from her love.
60 This was the message of the writing⁵
that he had sent to her:
he had been there a long time,
had waited and remained
to find out and to discover
65 how he could see her,

for he could not live without her.
With the two of them it was just
as it is with the honeysuckle
that attaches itself to the hazel tree:
70 when it has wound and attached
and worked itself around the trunk,
the two can survive together;
but if someone tries to separate them,
the hazel dies quickly
75 and the honeysuckle with it.
"Sweet love, so it is with us:
You cannot live without me, nor I without you."
The queen rode along;
she looked at the hillside
80 and saw the piece of wood; she knew what it was,
she recognized all the letters.
The knights who were accompanying her,
who were riding with her,
she ordered to stop:
85 she wanted to dismount and rest.
They obeyed her command.
She went far away from her people
and called her girl
Brengevin, who was loyal to her.
90 She went a short distance from the road;
and in the woods she found him
whom she loved more than any living thing.
They took great joy in each other.
He spoke to her as much as he desired,
95 she told him whatever she liked.
Then she assured him
that he would be reconciled with the king—
for it weighed on him
that he had sent Tristan away;
100 he'd done it because of the accusation.
Then she departed, she left her love,

but when it came to the separation,
they began to weep.
Tristan went to Wales,
105 to wait until his uncle sent for him.
For the joy that he'd felt
from his love when he saw her,
by means of the stick he inscribed
as the queen had instructed,
110 and in order to remember the words,
Tristan, who played the harp well,
composed a new *lai* about it.
I shall name it briefly:
in English they call it *Goat's Leaf*
115 the French call it *Chevrefoil*.
I have given you the truth
about the *lai* that I have told here.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Old French term for honeysuckle. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Tristan and Ysolt ("the queen"), lovers well-known in medieval literature for their tragic separation. Ysolt is the wife of King Mark, Tristan's uncle. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Public proclamation. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Cornwall. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: It is not clear how Tristan's name on the hazelwood conveys his extensive message. [Return to reference 5](#)

TRISTAN AND YSOLT

Since its first recorded appearance, the story of Tristan (also known as "Tristan") and Ysolt has attracted adaptation, from plentiful medieval retellings to Wagner's opera (1857–59) and recent Hollywood movies. Two lovers, the brilliant and gifted Tristan and Ysolt, are destined for each other but doomed to be apart. The intensity of their mutual love is both expressed and sealed by the love potion they mistakenly drink as they travel by sea from Ireland to Cornwall, where Ysolt, bound by the inescapable needs of feudal power, is to marry King Mark of Cornwall, Tristan's uncle. This tragic story of love and its consequences was a runaway success in Europe from the mid-twelfth century forward: two twelfth-century Anglo-Norman versions, by Thomas of England (below) and Beroul (ca. 1160) survive, but the fame of Tristan and Ysolt was much more widely dispersed, as attested by other, shorter texts, such as *The Madness of Tristan* (below) and *Chevrefoil* ([pp. 187–90](#)), references in many other texts, and visual artifacts.

THOMAS OF ENGLAND

fl. ca. 1155

The tragic love story of Tristan and Ysolt, the wife of Tristan's maternal uncle King Mark, derives mainly from Breton, Welsh, and Irish sources, although it also incorporates motifs of Eastern tales that were probably transmitted to Europe from India via Arabic Spain. The romance of Tristan and Ysolt entered the mainstream of western European literature through the Old French version in octosyllabic couplets by a twelfth-century author who identifies himself only as "Thomas" and of whom practically nothing else is known for certain. Only 3,143 lines (roughly a sixth) of the poem survive, in nine separate fragments. But we can reconstruct the story from the *Tristrams saga* (1226), a relatively faithful translation into Old Norse, and the Middle High German adaptation *Tristan und Isolde* (also early thirteenth century) by Gottfried von Strassburg, who names the author of his major source "Thomas of Britain."

Thomas's *Tristan* is written in a dialect of western France containing Anglo-Norman forms; he is likely to have composed the romance for the court of Henry II. Borrowings from Wace's *Brut* (see [p. 140](#)) prove that he wrote after 1155, probably sometime before 1170. As Thomas himself tells his audience, "My lords, this tale is told in many ways." Comparisons with other early versions in French and German suggest that he was following a lost text from which he eliminated episodes he considered improbable or coarse, and to which he added new courtly and psychological dimensions. Thomas's work not only proved enormously influential by way of Gottfried's important poem (the source of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*), but it may well have provided the inspiration and model for the love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere. That relationship first appears (already in progress) in Chrétien de Troye's romance *The Knight of the Cart*.

The romance of Tristan was drawn into the orbit of Arthurian romance, where Sir Tristan is the only knight who can match Sir Lancelot. After fighting a five-hour duel to a draw, they become fast friends. Tristan is thus a champion in war and tournaments, but in Thomas and in other Tristan romances he has other attributes as well: he is a master of the hunt, chess, and several languages; he is a gifted harp player; and he and Ysolt make an expert team in the art of deceiving a jealous husband.



Tristan and Isolde, French ivory, ca. 1350. The image depicts a night scene in which the reflection of the face of King Mark,

hiding in the tree above, is spotted by the lovers in the pool below (note Ysolt's pointing finger).

Tristan starts life as an orphan. His own story is preceded by the romance of his parents: Rivalen and Blanche-flor, the sister of King Mark. Rivalen is killed in battle before Tristan's birth; Blanche-flor dies in childbirth. Tristan is fostered by his father's steward until he is kidnapped by merchants who lure the handsome youth aboard their ship to play chess and then set sail. A storm they blame on the kidnapping causes them to strand the youth on a deserted coast of his uncle's kingdom. Tristan's gifts and charm lead Mark to adopt him as a trusted servant, who is identified as his nephew when Tristan's foster father arrives at the court in search of him. Mark contracts to marry the king of Ireland's daughter, Ysolt, and sends Tristan to escort the bride to England. On the return voyage, Tristan and Ysolt become lovers after they unwittingly drink a love potion her mother had prepared for Ysolt and Mark. On Ysolt's wedding night, her maid Brengvein takes her place in the marriage bed. Tristan and Ysolt scheme repeatedly to meet secretly and devise ways to allay Mark's suspicions and frustrate his attempts to surprise them. Finally, however, Tristan is exiled from Britain and pursues wars on the Continent. Eventually, fearing that Ysolt no longer loves him and hoping that he will get over his love for her, he marries a second Ysolt, "Ysolt of the White Hands," the sister of Tristan's young friend and admirer Caerdin. Tristan, however, cannot bring himself to consummate the marriage, and the second Ysolt remains an unwilling virgin. When Tristan is wounded by a poisoned spear, Caerdin sets sail for England to fetch the first Ysolt, who alone has it in her power to save Tristan's life.

Medieval people believed that given names sometimes foreshadowed one's destiny, and the French authors of Tristan's story interpreted *trist*, the Celtic root of the name, as French *triste* (sad). The sense of a tragic illicit love whose passion finds an ultimate fulfillment in death haunts the story of Tristan and Ysolt in Thomas and in the different versions that derive from it.

The geography of the Tristan romances varies from version to version. Tristan's homeland Lyonesse may originally have been Lothian in Scotland. In Marie de France's *Chevrefoil* (see [pp. 187–90](#)), it is in Wales. In Thomas it is Brittany, and the voyages across the English Channel and Irish Sea are episodes in which the sea itself plays a pivotal and symbolic role.

From Le Roman de Tristan¹

[THE DEATHS OF TRISTAN AND YSOLT]

When Ysolt hears this message, she not only feels anguish at heart. She also feels sorrow and pity, more than at any previous time. She meditates and sighs in her desire for her lover Tristan, without knowing how to proceed. She goes to Brengvein and recounts the story of the poisoning of the wound; of Tristan's pain; of how he lies stricken with weakness; of how and by whom he has sent for her, without whom his wound will never heal. She discloses all this misery and takes counsel as to how she should act. As they sigh and weep, their dialogue is convulsed by pain on account of the sympathy they share for him. They resolve to go to him on a journey with Caerdin, so as to advise him concerning Tristan's illness and to comfort Tristan in his dire need.

They made ready for an evening departure, taking all that was necessary. With everyone else asleep, they left with cunning but in peril, by a small postern² in the wall above the Thames. As the tide came in, the water raised their boat. The vessel was completely ready for departure when the queen embarked. As the tide ebbed, they rowed and sailed, swiftly taking leave with the wind's help. With intense effort they did not stop rowing until they arrived at the sea-going ship, where they hoisted sail and departed. With a following wind they sailed beside the coast of the foreign land, past the port of Wissant, then Boulogne and Treport. The wind favored them steadily, with the ship being easily maneuverable. They passed by Normandy, and joyfully sailed on with the wind behind them.

Tristan lay bedridden, languishing from his wound, unable to draw solace from any source. The doctors could do nothing for him, and nothing could relieve his pain. He longs for Ysolt's arrival and thinks of nothing else. Without her, healing is impossible, and only

for her does he continue to live. He weakens in bed, awaiting her; he hopes that she should come and restore his health; he is persuaded that without her he cannot live. Throughout the day he sends servants to the shore, to see if a ship has arrived. His heart is possessed by this single desire. He often commands that his bed be taken to the shore to receive the ship and to see how it moves and with what sails. He is obsessed by the thought, desire, and hope of her coming. He set at naught all his earthly possessions if the queen should not come to him. Just as often he commands that he be taken back inside, on account of his fear that she not come, and that she had broken faith with him; he would much prefer to hear from someone else that she had not come than that he should see the ship arrive without her. He longs to see the ship and would not countenance thought of news that she had not come. His heart is full of trepidation, and he longs to behold her. He often bewails his condition to his wife, without saying (except to Caerdin) what he longs for that does not come. He waits so long that he is deeply anxious that his plan has failed.

Listen now to a heart-rending misfortune, and an event that is full of sorrow and pity for all lovers; you have never heard so painful a story of such desire and such love. While Tristan waits for Ysolt, Ysolt longs to arrive. So close has she come to the shore that she sees the land and the ship sails happily. From the south, however, a strong wind suddenly springs up and strikes the mid-mainsail, causing the ship to turn around. The sailors run to luff,³ and turn the sail, but whatever they do, the ship turns back. The wind redoubles in force, and raises waves, heaving the depths to the surface. The weather darkens, the sky closes in, the billows of water heave, the sea grows black, rain and sleet fall as the storm rises in force. The cables and bowlines snap. The sailors lower the sail, and are driven by the wind, steered by waves and gale. Because they were close to land, they had put their safety boat on the sea, which was foolish since it was smashed to pieces. What is more, they have now lost so much equipment, and the storm has so redoubled that no sailor

could stand steadily. They all wept and wildly lamented their terrifying predicament.

Then Ysolt spoke. "Alas! Fate is against me! God will not permit me to live long enough to see Tristan my love. Would that I could be drowned in the sea! If only, Tristan, I could have spoken with you just once, I would not have cared then to have died. When, my love, you hear of my death, you will be incapable of any relief. My death will add to your sorrow, adding to your weakness and preventing your recovery. My arrival is now beyond my control.

"Had God willed that I should arrive, I would have tended to your wound, since my only suffering is yours. This is my sorrow and anguish, and in my heart I grieve that you will have no remedy to delay your death when I die. I care nothing for my death; insofar as God wills it, I accept it. But as soon as you hear of it, I know that you will die. Our love is such that I cannot feel anything without you; you cannot die without me, nor I without you. If I must suffer sea wreck, then your own drowning is fit. You cannot drown on dry land; you should come to seek me on the sea. I intuit that you will die before me, and I know well that you will die soon. My love, I die longing since I had hoped to die in your arms and to be buried together in a tomb. Of that we have failed. Even yet, however, it may turn out thus, for if I must drown here, you ought also to die here, with a single fish consuming us both. Thus by chance, my love, we may have one tomb. A man might catch the fish and recognize us, and then honor our bodies as befits our love. But what I say may not come to pass.

"Whatever God wills, must therefore happen. But why would you be searching on the sea? I don't know what you would be doing there, but here I am and here shall I die. I shall drown here without you, Tristan. Then I have some consolation that you will not know of my death. Beyond this place, my love, it will never be known, and I know of no one who could tell you of it. You will live long beyond me and expect my coming. You may be cured by God's will. That is the one thing I most desire, and I long for your recovery more than my safe arrival. For my love for you is so pure, that I should rather be

afraid that you will finally forget my love when you are cured, Tristan, or that you will derive comfort from another woman after my death.

"Truly, my love, I dread and fear Ysolt of the White Hands. I don't know if I should be afraid of her, but rest assured that, if you were to die before me, I would not survive long thereafter. Truly, I do not know what to do, only that I desire you above anything else. May God grant that we are reunited so that I can cure you, my love, or so that we can die together in a single anguish."

Thus while her torment endured, Ysolt wailed and lamented. More than five days the storm and the foul weather lasted; then the wind fell, and the weather was fair. They hoisted up the white sail and sailed with good speed, so that Caerdin espied Brittany. Then were they glad and merry and drew the sail high so that it might be seen from afar whether it were white or black.⁴ From afar would Caerdin show that color: it was the last day that Lord Tristan had assigned them that they should return from England.

While they sailed gladly, it grew warmer, and the wind fell so that they might not sail. Entirely soft and smooth was the sea. Neither here nor there their ship stirred, except as the wave drew it, nor did they have their safety boat any longer. Now was there great distress. Near before them they saw the land, but they did not have the wind to attain it. Hither and thither they went drifting, now forward now backward; they may not advance their voyage, and great was their hardship. Ysolt was tormented sorely by this: she perceived the land she had coveted, but might not attain it. She nearly died of her longing. Within the ship they desired land, but the wind blew ever softly. Often Ysolt called herself wretched. They wished the ship at the shore.

Tristan was heavy and woeful and moaned often and sighed for Ysolt, whom he so desired: his eyes wept, his body writhed, and he nearly perished for desire. In this anguish and woe, his wife Ysolt came before him, intending great treason, and she said, "My dear, Caerdin now comes. His ship have I beheld on the sea; I have barely seen it sailing, but yet I have so beheld it that I know it is his. God

grant he bring such tidings by which you shall have comfort for your heart."

Tristan starts up at that news and says to Ysolt, "Fair love, do you know for certain it is his ship? Now tell me, what is the sail?"

Thus says Ysolt: "I know it certainly. Know well that the sail is altogether black. They have hoisted it and drawn it high, since the wind fails them."

Then Tristan feels such sharp anguish that never had he nor would he feel greater, and he turns himself to the wall and says: "God save Ysolt and me. Since you would not come to me, it is fitting for me to die for your love. I may no longer keep my life. For you I die, Ysolt, fair love. You have no pity on my feebleness, but for my death you will have woe. Great solace it is to me, love, that you will have pity for my death." Three time he said, "Ysolt, my love." At the fourth he yielded up his spirit.

Then throughout the house they wept, the knights and the companions; the noise was loud and the lamentation great. Knights and sergeants went forth and bore the body from the bed and laid it upon a cloth of samite and covered it with a striped pall.⁵ On the sea the wind has risen and strikes in the midst of the sail and drives the ship to land. Ysolt disembarks from the ship and hears the great laments in the street, and the bells in the minsters and the chapels, and asks of men what news, and why they make such ringing and why such weeping.

An old man then says, "Fair lady, so God me help, we have here such great sorrow that never people had greater. Tristan, the noble and proved, is dead. He was a solace unto all this realm. He gave succor to the poor and great aid to the wretched. Just now he has died in his bed of a wound he had in his body. Never before such misadventure befell this region."

As soon as Ysolt has heard the news, for woe she cannot utter a word. For his death she is so sorrowful. Lifting her robe she goes up the street before the others into the palace. The Bretons never saw a woman of her beauty; they wonder throughout the city about whence she comes and who she is.

Ysolt goes to where she sees the body and turns to the east and prays for him piteously: "Tristan, my love, now that I see you dead, according to reason I should not live. Dead you are for my love, and I die, love, for pity, since I might not arrive in time to heal you and your wound. My love, my love, for your death nevermore shall I have comfort, nor joy nor pleasure nor delight. Cursed be the tempest that kept me so long at sea, my love, that I might not come. If I had come in time, I would have given you life and spoken sweetly to you of the love that was between us; I would have bewailed our fortune, our bliss, our pleasure, and the pain and the great anguish that has been in our love; and I would have recalled this and kissed you and held you. If I did not have the power to heal you, then we would have died together. Since now I might not arrive in time and I did not know your plight and have arrived to your death, of the same drink shall I have solace. For me you have lost your life, and I shall do as a true lover should: for you and with you will I die."

She embraced him and, lying at full length, kissed his mouth and face, and tightly she clung to him, and stretched her body to his body, and laid her mouth to his mouth. Then she yielded up her spirit and died here beside him, for sorrow of her lover. Tristan died for longing, Ysolt because she came too late. Tristan died for love, and the fair Ysolt for pity.

Here Thomas ends his writing. He gives to all lovers greeting, to the wretched and the amorous, to the jealous and the desirous, to the blithe and the despairing, to all those who will hear these verses. If I have not spoken wholly according to their will, I have said the best unto my power, and I have told all the truth even as I promised at the first, and words and verses have I preserved. As an example have I done this, and to make this history beautiful so it should please lovers, so that here and there they might find something to remember, that they might have from it great solace, despite change, despite wrong, despite pain, despite tears, despite all the wiles of love.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is by Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Romance of Tristan and Ysolt* (1923). It has been thoroughly modernized.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Secondary door or gate.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Steer a boat nearer the wind.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Tristan has instructed Caerdin that upon returning, he should hoist a white sail if Ysolt is with him and a black sail if she is not. Ysolt of the White Hands overhears their plan.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Cloth spread over a coffin or tomb. "Samite": heavy, luxurious silk fabric.[Return to reference 5](#)

THE MADNESS OF TRISTAN

When a richly complex narrative is extremely familiar, later writers can adapt it allusively. Later twelfth-century Anglo-Norman writers adapted the story of Tristan and Ysolt in this way, in usually smaller versions that focus on a sequence, or even a single fragment, of the narrative (for example, Marie de France's *Chevrefoil*, [pp. 187–90](#)). In the Anglo-Norman text presented here, known as the *Oxford Madness of Tristan*, the author shapes his or her own new narrative as a fragment within, and by frequent reference to, the broader, well-known narrative of Thomas ([pp. 190–95](#)). A further example of the "Madness of Tristan" narrative survives, in the *Berne Madness of Tristan* (the manuscripts of these two texts are held in Oxford and Berne, respectively).

That the narrative of Tristan and Ysolt should collapse into fragments is itself peculiarly apt, given that this story of illicit, intensely private love can have no ultimate coherence, and given that the lovers must retreat into tiny, private moments of isolated joy. The intensity of that joy is heightened by contrast with the self-destructive, self-mutilating disguises that Tristan must adopt in order to see his lover. These disguises are extreme: Tristan disfigures himself to appear as a court jester (or *fole*) to such an extent that he borders on madness (*folie*). Even as he uses the truth to disguise himself (the fool declares his love for Queen Ysolt in the presence of the king and the court), so too does the possibility of that love's fulfillment recede (the courtiers all laugh at the jester's seemingly absurd declaration of love). The struggle to maintain one's identity becomes so demanding as to fragment identity, and to merge extreme pain and joy. Tristan must hide his true self from everyone around him—from his friend Caerdin, and from the king and his court. The compulsion to hide becomes so engrained, indeed, that Tristan, to our surprise and shock, finally disguises himself (unnecessarily) from Ysolt when he uses a false voice even in the

intimacy of her chamber. It is no accident that Tristan should say that he will live with Ysolt in a wholly transparent, crystal palace, suspended in the air: a narrative marked by ever-thickening opacity and dissembling, in which even the most intimate relationships need to be disguised, produces a dream of pure transparency. Tokens of recognition and identity, so crucial to romance narratives, serve here almost endlessly to block and defer recognition, producing a seeming romance in reverse; and far from producing private, life-giving understanding, the precious signs of intimacy here become instruments of emotional cruelty.

Deferral of joy seems to be painfully indefinite, until Husdent the dog joyfully recognizes his master (note the distant echoes of the dog of Ulysses as he returns to Ithaca), and until Tristan changes his voice. Tristan, we realize, has been disguising himself deliberately from Ysolt—and from us.

From The Madness of Tristan¹

Miserable, dejected, sad, and downcast, Tristan dwelt in his land.² He meditated on what he could do, for he lacked all solace: a cure would solace him, or, if there were none, better to die. Better to die once and for all, than for ever to be so distraught, and better to die once and for all, than forever languish in pain. To live in anguish is death itself; anxiety defeats and destroys man. Just so did pain, grief, anxiety, and distress defeat Tristan. He saw there was no cure for him: without solace he would have to die. Death, then, was certain, since he had lost his love, his joy, since he had lost Ysolt the queen. He wished to die, he desired to die, but only so long as she knew he was dying for love of her, for if she knew it, he would at least die more easily. He suspected everyone and hid his mind from them, fearing betrayal. Above all he hid his mind from Caerdin, his friend, for he feared that if he told him his plan, he would prevent him. For he wished and intended to go straight to England, not with a horse but entirely on foot, so as not to be recognized in that land. Because he was well known there, he would be soon spotted. But no one notices a poor man on foot; no one at court takes heed of a poor, bare messenger. He intended to disguise himself and so change his appearance that no one would ever know he was Tristan, however hard they looked. Neither family, neighbors, fellows, nor friends would discover his identity. He kept his thoughts so quiet that he said nothing to anyone; he was wise, for disclosing secrets beforehand often brings great harm. No misfortune, I believe, will ever befall the man who thus hides, and will not reveal, his thoughts. Telling and disclosing secrets is often the cause of many disasters. People suffer from their own thoughtlessness.

Tristan prudently held his counsel and thought hard. He did not long delay: in bed at night he took his decision, and early in the morning he set out on his road. He did not stop till he reached the

sea. He came to the sea and found the ship ready and all that he needed. The ship was large, fine and strong, a good merchants' boat. Its cargo came from many lands, and it was bound for England.

The sailors hauled up the sail and weighed anchor. They were eager to be on the high seas: there was a good wind for sailing. Then Tristan the brave appeared and said to them: "My lords, God save you all! Where are you going, God willing?" "To England, with luck!" they replied. Tristan said to the sailors: "I wish you a good voyage! My lords, take me with you: we both want to go to Britain." They said to him: "Agreed: come along then, embark." Tristan approached and went on board. The wind swelled the topsail and they went speedily through the waves, cutting through the deep sea. They had their will and plenty of good wind. They ran straight for England, spending two nights and a day on the voyage, and on the second day, if the record is true, they came to the port, at Tintagel.

King Mark dwelt there, as did Queen Ysolt, and a great court was gathered there, following the custom of the king. Tintagel was a very fine, strong castle, impervious to attack or siege-engine. . . . ³ It stood by the sea, in Cornwall,⁴ its tower large and strong: it was built by giants long ago. All its stones were of marble, superbly laid and joined. The wall was checkered with red and blue blocks. There was a gate to the castle, handsome, large, and strong; the entry and exit were well guarded by two valiant men.

There dwelt King Mark, with Britons and with Cornish-men, because of the castle, which he loved, and so did Queen Ysolt. Round about were many meadows, many woods for game, fresh water, fish-ponds and fine fields. Ships sailing by on the sea would arrive at the castle's port. People from other lands, both friends and strangers, looking for the king would there come to him from over the sea, and that is why he loved it so. The spot was lovely and delightful, the land good and fruitful, and thus once upon a time Tintagel was called the enchanted castle. It was rightly called so, because twice a year, once in winter and once in summer, truly no one can see it, neither a local man nor anyone else, however hard

they try—so say the people in the neighborhood. Tristan's ship arrived and carefully dropped anchor in the port.

Tristan jumped up and left ship, and sat down on the shore. He sought and asked for news of King Mark and his whereabouts. They told him he was in town and held a great court. "And where is Queen Ysolt and Brenguain, her lovely handmaid?" "Indeed, they are here: it's not long since I saw them. But Queen Ysolt, as usual, certainly looks very sad." When Tristan heard Ysolt's name, he fetched a sigh from his heart. He decided on a trick to help him see his mistress.

He knew well there was no device to be found to enable him to talk to her. Prowess, knowledge, intelligence, skill—all were of no avail, for King Mark, he well knew, hated him above all things, and if he could catch him alive, he was convinced he would kill him. Then he thought of his mistress and said: "What does it matter if he kills me? I ought to die for love of her. Alas! I already die every day. Ysolt, for you I suffer so much. Ysolt, for you I so much wish to die. Ysolt, if you knew I was here, I'm not sure you would talk to me. I've gone mad for your love, yet I'm here and you don't know it. I don't know how I can talk to you, hence my anguish.

"Now I want to try something else, to see if I succeed: I'll pretend I'm a fool, behave as if mad. Isn't that clever and a stroke of cunning? That's shrewd: since neither time nor place are on my side, nothing wiser can be done. Whoever holds me silly, I'll be wiser than he, and whoever holds me a fool will have stupider men at home."

Tristan kept to this decision. He saw a fisherman coming towards him. He wore a tunic of coarse wool, with open sides, and a hood. Tristan saw him and beckoned to him and led him off with him in secret. "My friend," he said, "let's change clothes. You shall have mine, which are good. I will have your tunic, which pleases me greatly, for I often dress in such clothes." The fisherman saw the clothes were good, took them, and gave him his, and when he had them he was delighted and went off like a shot.

Tristan had some scissors, which he would carry about with him. He treasured them: Ysolt had given him them. With the scissors he shaved his hair on the top of his head: he certainly looked idiotic and crazy. Then he cut a cross-shaped tonsure.⁵ He knew how to transform his voice completely. He stained his face with an herb he had brought from his own land: he smeared it with its juice and then it changed color and went dark. No man alive, seeing and hearing him, would have recognized him or claimed him as Tristan. He took a stake from a hedge and held it on his shoulder. He went straight towards the castle; everyone who saw him was afraid.

When the porter saw him, he summed him up as a mad fool. He said to him: "Come here! Where have you been so long?"

The fool replied: "I was at the wedding of the Abbot of St. Michael's Mount, my old friend. He married an abbess, a fat nun. There was not a priest, abbot, monk, or clerk in orders, of whatever kind, from Besançon to the Mount, who was not invited to the wedding, and they all brought staves and crosses. There, in the pastures below Bel Encumbre,⁶ they jump and play in the shade. I left them, because today I've got to serve the king at table."

The porter replied: "Come in, Urgan the Hairy's son. You are large and hairy, to be sure, and thus very like him."⁷ The fool entered by the wicket gate. The young men ran up to him, shouting at him as men do to a wolf: "Look at the fool! Hu! hu! hu! hu!" The young men and the squires were intent on attacking him with branches of boxwood. They accompanied him across the courtyard, following the mad boy. He turned on them many times, playing the fool at will. If one attacked him on the right, he turned and struck towards the left. He came to the door of the hall and entered, stake over his shoulder. At once the king, from his seat on the royal dais,⁸ noticed him. He said: "There's a good servant. Make him come forward." Many jumped up and went to meet him, greeting him in accordance with his looks. Then they brought the fool, stake over his shoulder, before the king. Mark said: "Welcome, friend. Where are you from? What do you seek here?"

The fool said: "Indeed I'll tell you whence I am and what I seek. My mother was a whale and dwelt in the sea like a siren, but I've no idea where I was born. But I will know who brought me up: a great tigress suckled me, in the rocks where she found me. She found me under a block of stone, thought I was her cub, and fed me from her breast. But I have a most beautiful sister: I will give her to you, if you like, in exchange for Ysolt, whom you love so much." The king laughed and then replied: "What would the wonder of the world say to that?" "King, I'll give you my sister for Ysolt, whom I love dearly. Let's make a bargain, let's make an exchange: it's good to try out something new. You're quite tired of Ysolt: get to know someone else. Give her to me, I'll take her. I'll be of service to you, king, out of love."

The king listened to him and laughed, and said to the fool: "God help you, tell me what you would do with the queen, or where you would put her, if I gave her into your power, to take away?" "King," said the fool, "Up there in the air I have a hall where I live. It's large and splendid, made of glass, and the sun comes streaming in. It's in the air, hanging from the clouds; the wind neither rocks nor shakes it. Beside the hall is a paneled room made of crystal. At daybreak, the sun floods it with light."

The king and the rest laughed at this. They spoke among themselves, saying: "This is a good fool, he talks well. He can speak on anything." "King," said the fool, "I adore Ysolt: my heart suffers and aches for her. I am Trantris,⁹ who loved her so, and will as long as I live."

Ysolt heard him, sighed deeply, and was angry and furious with the fool. She said: "Who let you in here? Fool, you aren't Trantris, you lie." The fool listened more carefully to Ysolt than to the others; he was well aware she was angry from the changed color in her face.

Then he said: "Queen Ysolt, I am Trantris who used to love you. You must remember when I was wounded—there were many who knew it well—in fighting the Morholt, who wanted to claim tribute from you.¹ In fighting, I had the luck to kill him, I don't deny it. I

was badly wounded, for the sword was poisoned. It damaged my hip bone and the virulent poison fomented, clinging to the bone and turning it black; there was then such pain there that no doctor could cure it and I thought I would die of it. I put out to sea, to die there, so badly did the suffering torment me. The wind got up and a great storm drove my boat to Ireland. I had to land in the country I most had reason to fear, for I had killed the Morholt, your uncle, Queen Ysolt; hence I was afraid of the land. But I was wounded and wretched. I tried taking pleasure in my harp, but it gave me no comfort, despite my love for it. Very soon people heard tell of my skill at harping. At once I was summoned to court just as I was, in my wounded state. Thanks to the queen, there I was cured of my wound. I taught you fine lays to the harp, Breton lays from our land.² You must remember, my lady Queen, how the medicine cured me. There I named myself Trantris: am I not him? What do you think?"

Ysolt replied: "No indeed! For he was a fine and noble man, and you, who call yourself Trantris, are coarse, ugly, and horrible. Now be off, stop shouting at me. I don't care for your jokes or for you." The fool turned about at these words and began playing the madman to perfection. He struck those he found in his way, escorting them from the dais to the door. Then he shouted at them: "Madmen, be off, out of here! Let me confer with Ysolt: I've come here to court her." The king laughed, for he enjoyed this very much. Ysolt flushed and kept silence.

And the king was well aware of it. He said to the fool: "Rascal, come here. Isn't Queen Ysolt your mistress?" "Yes indeed! I won't deny it."

Ysolt answered: "You're a liar! Throw the fool out!" The fool laughed in reply, and spoke as he wished to Ysolt: "Don't you remember, Queen Ysolt, what the king did when he wanted to send me on a mission? He sent me to get you, whom he's now married. I went there as a merchant, seeking my fortune. I was much hated in the land because I had killed the Morholt: that's why I went as a merchant and that was very shrewd.³ I was to seek you for the

king's use, your lord, whom I see here, who was hardly loved in that land, while I was bitterly hated. I was a splendid knight, enterprising and brave, afraid of no one, from Scotland to Rome."

Ysolt replied: "That's a good story. You're a disgrace to knights, for you're a congenital idiot. A pity you're still alive! Get out, for God's sake!" The fool heard her and laughed.

Then he continued, like this: "My lady Queen, you must remember the dragon I killed, when I arrived in your land. I struck its head from its body,⁴ cut its tongue and removed it, thrusting it in my hose. And from the poison I got such a fever, I was sure I would die; I lay fainting by the road. Your mother and you saw me and saved me from death. With skill and powerful medicine you cured me of the poison.⁵

"Do you remember the bath I sat in? You nearly killed me there. You were about to perform that amazing feat once you had unsheathed my sword. When you drew it out and found the notch in it, then you thought, rightly, the Morholt had perished by it. You quickly thought of a clever idea: you opened your casket and found inside the piece you had taken out of his head. You matched the piece to the sword: it fitted at once. You were very bold, at once to try and kill me in the bath with my own sword.⁶ How full of fury woman is! And at your cry, the queen came, for she had heard you. You know how I made my peace, for I kept begging for mercy; and besides, I had to defend you against the man intent on taking you.⁷ You would not have him at any price for you found him odious. Ysolt, I defended you from him. Isn't what I say true?"

"It's not true, it's a lie; it's your own fantasies you relate. You went drunk to bed last night, and drunkenness made you dream."

"True: I am drunk, from such a drink that I'll never be sober.

"Don't you remember when your father and mother gave you to me? They put us to sea, on the ship; I was to bring you here to the king. When we were on the open sea, I'll tell you what we did. The day was fine and hot, we were on the high seas and you were thirsty from the heat. Don't you remember, king's daughter? We both

drank from the same cup: you drank it, I drank it. I've been drunk on it ever after,⁸ but that intoxication costs me dear."

When Ysolt heard this, she wrapped her mantle around her and stood up, wishing to go. The king seized her and made her sit down; he seized her by her ermine cloak and sat her down again beside him. "Patience, Ysolt my love; let's hear this folly through to the end. Fool," said the king, "now I'd like to hear the ways you can be of service."

The fool answered Mark: "I have served kings and counts." "Do you know about dogs? And horses?" "Yes," he said, "I've had some fine ones!" The fool told him: "King, when I want to hunt in woods or forest, with my greyhounds I take the cranes flying up there in the skies; with my leash-hounds I take swans and white and grey geese, one after another. When I go out with my hunting-dogs I take many coots and bitterns." Mark laughed heartily at the fool and so did everyone, great and small. Then he said to the fool: "My friend, my dear brother, what can you catch in the marshes?"

The fool began to laugh and replied: "King, whatever I find, I take, for with my goshawks I take the forest wolves and the great bears.⁹ I catch the boars with my gerfalcons, neither hills or valleys protect them. I'll take roe-buck and fallow-deer with my little high-flying falcons and with my sparrow-hawk, the fox, with his fine tail. With my merlin I'll take the hare, with my falcon, the wild-cat and beaver. When I come back home, then I'm a good fencer with my stake: no one escapes a blow of mine, no matter how well he covers. I know how to share out the logs between the squires and the grooms. I know how to tune both harp and rote,¹ and then sing to the melody. I know how to love a noble queen and no lover under heaven is my equal. I know how to cut wood-chips with my knife, and throw them into streams.² Am I not a good servant? Today I've served you with my stake." Then he struck those around him with the stake. "Leave the king's presence!" he said. "All go back to your lodgings! Have you not eaten? Why do you stay?"

The king laughed at every word, delighted with the fool. Then he summoned a squire to bring him his horse, saying he wished to go

out and amuse himself, as was his custom. His knights went with him, and so did the squires, to relieve boredom.

"By your leave, my lord," said Ysolt, "I'm ill, my head aches. I will go and rest in my chamber. I cannot listen to this din." Then the king let her go. She jumped up and left, entering her chamber in deep thought. She called herself miserable and wretched. She came to her bed and sat down; the lamentation she made was very great.

"Alas!" she said, "why was I born? My heart is heavy and sad. Brenguain, my fair sister," she said, "really, I'm almost dead. If I were dead, I'd be better off, since my life is so bitter and hard. I meet hostility wherever I look. Indeed, Brenguain, I don't know what to do, for a fool has arrived over there, his hair in a cross-shaped tonsure. He arrived in an evil hour, for he has caused me much pain. Really, this fool, this mad scoundrel, must be a soothsayer or magician, for he knows my life and my situation from top to bottom, my dear friend. Indeed, Brenguain, I wonder who revealed my secrets to him, since no one except you, I and Tristan, was privy to them. But this beggar, I think, knows them all by magic. Never did any man speak more truly, for he never got a single word wrong."

Brenguain replied: "It's Tristan himself, I'm sure I'm right." "No, Brenguain, for he's ugly and hideous and deformed, and Tristan is so shapely, a handsome man, well made, well educated. You could not find in any land a knight of greater renown. So I'll never believe it's my lover Tristan. But curses on this fool! Cursed be his life and cursed be the ship that brought him here! Pity he didn't drown in the waves, out there in the deep sea!"

"Be quiet, my lady," Brenguain said. "Now you are offensive. Where did you learn such talents? You're well acquainted with cursing!" "Brenguain, he put me out of my wits. Never did I hear a man talk so." "By St. John, my lady, I believe he's Tristan's messenger." "Indeed, I'm not sure, I don't know him. But go to him, my dear friend, speak with him, if you can, and discover if you know him."

Brenguain, who was courteous, jumped up, and went straight to the hall, but there she found neither freeman nor serf, only the fool, sitting on a bench. Everyone else had gone to their lodgings in the city. Brenguain saw him and stopped, at a distance, and Tristan recognized her very well. Then he threw down his stake and said: "Welcome, Brenguain. Noble Brenguain, I beg you, for God's sake, to have pity on me."

Brenguain replied: "And why do you want me to pity you?" "Oh come! I am Tristan, living in pain and grief. I am Tristan, in misery for the love of Queen Ysolt." Brenguain said: "No, it's my belief you're not." "Indeed, Brenguain, I really am. Tristan was my name when I came here and I truly am he. Brenguain, don't you remember, when we left Ireland together, how I had you in my care, you and Ysolt, who now won't recognize me? When the queen came towards me, holding you by the right hand, she gave the charge of you into my hands. You must remember, beautiful Brenguain. She charged me with Ysolt and you; she required me, she begged me, to receive you into my care and guard you as best I could. Then she gave you a flask, by no means large but small, telling you to guard it well if you desired her friendship.³ When we were on the open sea, the weather grew warm. I wore a tunic, I was hot and sweating, I was thirsty, and asked for drink: you know if I'm telling the truth. A lad sitting at my feet got up, and took the flask. He poured into a silver goblet the drink that he found there, then placed the goblet in my hand and, needing it, I drank. I offered half to Ysolt, who was thirsty and wanted to drink. Beautiful Brenguain, would that I had never drunk that drink, or known you. Beautiful Brenguain, don't you remember?" Brenguain replied: "No, indeed."

"Brenguain, since I first loved Ysolt, she would tell it to no other: you knew and heard of it and you allowed the affair. Nobody in the world knew of it, nobody except we three." Brenguain heard what he told her; she went off quickly towards the chamber. He jumped up and followed her, begging for mercy. Brenguain came to Ysolt and smiled at her, according to their custom.⁴ Ysolt's face changed color

and paled, and at once she feigned illness. The chamber was immediately emptied because the queen was unwell.

And Brenguain went for Tristan and led him straight to the chamber. When he entered and saw Ysolt, he approached her, wishing to kiss her. But she retreated, much mortified; she stood, sweating, not knowing what to do. Tristan saw that she shunned him. He was crestfallen and ashamed. He stepped back a little to the wall, near the door.

Then he gave vent to some of his desires: "Indeed, I would never have thought that of you, Ysolt, noble Queen, nor Brenguain, your maidservant. Alas! to have lived long enough to see you treating me with such scorn and repugnance! In whom can I trust, when Ysolt won't deign to love me, when Ysolt considers me so base that she now has no memory of me? Ah! Ysolt, ah! my dear, the loving heart is slow to forget. We prize the leaping fountain, whose fine stream runs freely; but the moment it dries, and the water neither rushes nor springs, it is worth praise no longer. Nor is love, when it's disloyal."

Ysolt answered: "My brother, I can't tell. I look at you and I'm dismayed, for I see nothing in you to say you're Tristan the Lover." Tristan replied: "Queen Ysolt, I am Tristan, who used to love you. Don't you remember the seneschal who embroiled us with the king? We were both young then and shared a lodging. One night, when I went out, he got up and followed me. It had snowed and he traced my footsteps. He came to the palisade and crossed it, spied on us in your chamber, and the next day accused us. I believe he was the first to denounce us to the king.⁵

"Again, you must remember the dwarf, whom you so used to fear. He did not care about my pleasure: he was about us day and night. He was put there to spy on us, and carried out this service in a crazy fashion. On one occasion we had been bled;⁶ like any lovers in distress, who plan all kinds of cunning, ingenious and artful tricks in order to achieve meetings, pleasure and delight, we did the same. We had been bled in your room, where we were lying. But that crazy dwarf, son of a bitch, sprinkled flour between our beds, thus thinking

to discover whether there really was love between us.⁷ But I noticed it: feet together, I jumped into your bed. The wound in my arm spurled from the jump and bloodied your bed; I jumped back the same way and made my own bed bloody.

"Then King Mark arrived and found your bloodstained bed; at once he came to mine and found my bloody sheets. Queen, for love of you, I was then banished from court. Don't you remember, my darling, a little love-token I once sent you, a little dog I got for you? That was Petit Cru,⁸ whom you dearly loved. And there is one thing, Ysolt my love, which you must remember.

"When the Irishman came to court, the king showed him honour and affection. He was a harper, he knew how to harp; you knew him well. The king gave you to the harper: he gaily carried you off and was about to enter his ship. I was in the forest and heard about it. I took a rote and followed on horseback at a gallop. He won you through his harp, and I won you through my rote.⁹

"Queen, you must remember when the king banished me and I longed to speak with you, my love. I thought of a ruse, I came to the orchard where we had often been happy. I sat under a pine in the shade and cut woodchips with my knife, which served as signs between us when I wanted to come to you. A spring rose in that place, which ran by the chamber. I threw the chips in the water and the stream carried them along. When you saw the chips, you would know for sure that I would come that night, to delight in taking my pleasure.

"At once the dwarf took notice: he ran to tell King Mark. That night the king entered the garden and climbed into the pine. I came later, knowing nothing, but when I had been there a while, I noticed the shadow of the king sitting in the pine above me. You approached from the other direction. Then I was indeed terrified, but you must know I feared lest your haste were too great. But thank God, He didn't permit it. You saw the shadow, as I had, you stepped back, and I begged you to reconcile me with the king, if you could, or else ask him to pay my wages and let me leave the kingdom. This saved us, and I was reconciled with King Mark.¹

"Beautiful Ysolt, do you remember the oath you went through for me? When you left the boat, I held you gently in my arms. I had disguised myself thoroughly, as you told me to; I kept my head well down. I well remember what you then told me—to fall, holding you. Ysolt, my love, isn't that true? You fell gently to the ground, opening your thighs and letting me fall between them, and everyone saw it. As I see it, that's how you were saved, Ysolt, at the trial from the oath that you made in the king's court."² The queen listened to him, carefully noting every word. She examined him and sighed deeply; she did not know what on earth to say, for he did not look like Tristan in face, appearance, or clothes. But from what he said, she understood very well he told the truth, without a word of a lie. This filled her heart with anguish and she had no idea what to do. It would be mad and deceitful to recognize him as Tristan, when she saw, thought, and believed he was not Tristan but another. And Tristan could see very well that she quite failed to know him.

Then he said: "My lady Queen, how well you showed your nobility when you loved me without disdain. Now I can truly complain of your treachery. Now I see you distant and false, now I've convicted you of deceit. But I've seen the day, my love, when you truly loved me. When Mark banished us and drove us from the court, we took each other by the hand and left the hall. Then we went to the forest and found a most beautiful place there, a grotto in a rock. In front, the entry was narrow; inside, it was vaulted and well shaped, as beautiful as a picture, the stone finely and richly carved. In that vault we lived as long as we stayed in the forest. There I trained Husdent, my dearly loved dog, not to bark."³ With my dog and with my hawk, I kept us fed every day.

"My lady Queen, you're well aware how we were then found. The king himself found us, and the dwarf he took with him. But God was shielding us, when he found us lying apart and the sword between us. The king took the glove from his hand and put it over your face, gently and without a word, for he saw a sunbeam which had burnt and reddened it. Then the king went away and left us sleeping

there; after that, he had no suspicion of anything wrong between us. He dismissed the anger he had toward us and soon sent for us.⁴

"Ysolt, you must remember: it was then I gave you Husdent, my dog. What have you done with him? Show him to me." Ysolt replied: "I have him, upon my word! I have the dog you speak of: indeed, you shall see him at once. Brenguain, go and get the dog; bring him, along with his lead." She rose and jumped to her feet, she came to Husdent, who frisked for joy. She untied him, letting him go. He bounded off.

Tristan said to him: "Come here, Husdent! Once you were mine, now I'm taking you back." Husdent saw him, at once knew him, and greeted him, rightly, with joy. I have never heard tell of a dog making a greater fuss of his master than Husdent did, so much love did he show him. He rushed at him, head high, rubbing him with his muzzle, patting him with his paws. Never did an animal show such joy: it was pitiful to see.

Ysolt was amazed. She was ashamed and blushed to see him giving him such a welcome as soon as he heard his voice, for he was vicious and badly bred, and would bite and harm all those who played with him and all those who handled him. No one could get to know him or handle him except the queen and Brenguain, so obnoxious had he been since losing his master, who had nurtured and trained him.

Tristan held Husdent and stroked him. He said to Ysolt: "He remembers me, who nurtured and trained him, better than you do, whom I loved so much. There's such great nobility in a dog, such great deceit in woman." Ysolt heard him and changed color; she shuddered and sweated with anguish. Tristan said to her: "My lady Queen, how loyal you once were!

"Don't you remember how we were lying in the orchard when the king appeared, discovered us, and quickly withdrew? He planned a wicked deed: out of spite he would kill you. But thank God, He wouldn't have it, for I realized in time. I had to leave you, my love, for the king wished to disgrace us. Then you gave me your beautiful

ring, richly made of pure gold, and I received it and left, commending you to the one true God.”⁵

Ysolt said: “Tokens will convince me. Have you the ring? Show it to me.” He drew out the ring and gave it to her. Ysolt took it and looked at it; then she burst out weeping, she wrung her hands, she was distraught. “Alas for the day I was born!” she said, “I’ve finally lost my love, for I know well that no other man would have this ring if he were alive. Alas, I will never be comforted!” But when Tristan saw her weep, he was seized with pity, and rightly so.

Then he said: “My lady queen, now you are beautiful and true. Now I will no longer hide, but make myself heard and known.” He altered his tone and spoke in his true voice.

Ysolt realized at once. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his face and eyes.

Then Tristan said to Brenguain, who was overcome with delight: “Give me some water, my beauty: I’ll wash my dirty face.”

At once Brenguain brought the water and he soon cleansed his face: he washed off all the stain from the herb and its juice, along with the sweat. He resumed his own looks, and he held Ysolt in his arms. Such was the joy she had from her lover, whom she held by her side, that it knew no bounds. She would not let him leave that night, and promised him good lodging and a fine, well-made bed. Tristan desired only queen Ysolt, nothing but her. He was joyful and happy; he realized now he was well lodged.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation and select notes are derived from Judith Weiss, *The Birth of Romance: An Anthology* (1992).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Tristan’s “land” is Brittany, in what is now northwest France. It is also the home of Caerdin and his sister, Ysolt of the White Hands, whom Tristan marries.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Here there is a gap in the text of a line and a half.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Region in the far southwest of Great Britain.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Tonsure results from shaving part of the scalp, usually to signal renunciation of worldly fashion and esteem.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Bel Encumbre is in Normandy; St. Michael's Mount probably refers to the Cornish monastery of that name. Besançon is in eastern France. Here it simply means "from far off."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Urgan appears in other Tristan narratives as a giant defeated and killed by Tristan.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Raised platform at the front of a hall, for those of high social standing.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: "Trantris" is an anagram of "Tristan." Tristan has used this pseudonym in a previous adventure, when he is wounded and seeks a cure in Ireland. Ysolt, an expert in curative plants, heals him completely.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Many Tristan narratives depict Mark's kingdom as having to pay tribute to Ireland, first in money, then in beautiful children. Morholt, the maternal uncle of Ysolt, is a huge warrior who comes to Cornwall to enforce the tribute and is slain by Tristan in single combat. A piece of Tristan's sword is left embedded in Morholt's skull and is kept by Ysolt and her mother. It is Tristan's wound from this battle that requires Ysolt's healing.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Tristan's skill at the harp is one of his most famous characteristics, depicted in art as well as literature.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Tristan returns to Ireland a second time, this time disguised as a merchant, to arrange the marriage of Ysolt and Mark.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: On this second visit, Tristan confronts and kills a dragon. This narrative from Thomas's *Tristan* is preserved in the Norse translation of Thomas.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: This is the second time Ysolt and her mother cure Tristan in Ireland; the first is after his fight with Morholt. Tristan

and Ysolt have not yet drunk the love potion that seals their fate.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: In curing Tristan, Ysolt discovers the notch in Tristan's sword that exactly matches the fragment extracted from her uncle Morholt's head, and thereby understands that Tristan had killed her uncle. She threatens to kill Tristan in his bath with the sword, but is dissuaded from doing so.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An Irish court officer had falsely claimed to have killed the dragon, and he demanded the hand of Ysolt in recompense.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In some Tristan texts, the effects of the love potion wear off after three or four years, while in others they endure for life.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The joke is that the fool hunts birds with dogs and beasts with falcons—the inverse of usual practice. It is also ridiculous that a poor jester would be hunting at all, an activity reserved for aristocratic elites.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A triangular zither, with strings on both sides of the soundbox.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See *Chevrefoil* (pp. 187–90) for a depiction of Tristan's skill as carver of secret messages to Ysolt.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This is the love potion prepared for Ysolt and King Mark.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This seems to be an agreed signal between Ysolt and Brenguain.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A court officer notices that the footprints of Tristan in the snow lead to Ysolt's chamber; he eventually tells the king.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Bloodletting was a regular medical procedure for maintaining health in the Middle Ages.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The dwarf does not appear in the Thomas fragments except in the orchard scene. His flour trick appears in other Tristan texts.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Petit Cru is a magical dog that appears in other Tristan texts.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: This is the episode known as “the harp and the rote,” which appears in other Tristan texts. The Irish harper, having asked for, and been granted, an unspecified reward for his music, demands Ysolt. Mark is bound by his promise to hand her over.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: This episode appears in many Tristan texts (see also the ivory carving reproduced on p. 191). In Beroul’s version, Tristan and Ysolt, both conscious of the shadow of the king in the tree above them, immediately conduct a dialogue that suggests their innocence to the unwitting Mark as he listens to them.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Ysolt undertakes to clear herself of the charge of adultery by undergoing trial, either by oath or by the ordeal of the red-hot iron. On the day, she has arranged that as she lands from a boat, the disguised Tristan should offer to help carry her to shore and stumble in the process. She can then truly and safely swear that nobody, except the king and this “feeble pilgrim,” has ever been between her thighs.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Husdent appears in many Tristan texts.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This central episode occurs in all versions of the story. The separation of the lovers by the sword is taken by Mark to indicate their chaste love.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: This episode appears in the first of the fragments of Thomas’s poem.[Return to reference 5](#)

ANCRENE WISSE (GUIDE FOR ANCHORESSES)

An anchoress is a woman who has withdrawn from regular society to lead a solitary life focused on prayer and religious self-discipline. Anchoresses took vows to live in permanent enclosure, often in small, sealed cells attached to churches. The *Ancrene Wisse* (Guide of Anchoresses) is a manual for such women, instructing them in how to pursue their spiritually ambitious vocations. From the time it was composed, probably in the late 1220s, up until the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century, the *Ancrene Wisse* was copied and adapted for a variety of Christian readers, including not only anchorites but monks, nuns, and ordinary members of the laity—the secular part of society, composed of those who belong neither to the priesthood nor to monastic orders.

In the first half of the thirteenth century, the English language had not yet recovered the status it had enjoyed prior to the Norman Conquest, when Old English had been a vibrant literary language. It is thus remarkable that the writer chose English as the medium for such an extensive treatise—and the *Ancrene Wisse* is now known as an innovative, important work of early Middle English prose. In the years after its composition, the *Ancrene Wisse* was even translated into medieval Latin and French, reversing the usual direction of translation. Although the author is unknown, it is clear that he is a man of some religious authority and education. The treatise's original audience seems to have been three sisters who all became

anchoresses, though they are mentioned in just a single copy of the text.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Western Christendom had undergone major changes in devotion and piety. These changes promoted active, rigorous, and individualized modes of spirituality, centered on one's personal encounter with God. Although women pursued these spiritual commitments just as ardently as men, fewer resources were available to support women's spiritual lives. Religious houses for women were comparatively few in number, and joining a nunnery could be very expensive; for instance, to become a nun at Barking Abbey (as did Clemence of Barking; see [pp. 210–14](#)), you needed to be part of the wealthy elite. The role of anchoress provided a more accessible path to the religious life. The *Ancrene Wisse* meets the anchoresses where they are, newly converted from secular life and without much training in doctrine or liturgy (formalized ritual). The text's accessible and foundational instruction made it appealing to many readers in subsequent decades and centuries. (Notably it was an anchoress, Julian of Norwich [d. after 1416; see [pp. 220–32](#)], who almost two hundred years later would write the earliest surviving English-language work known to be authored by a woman.)

The style of the *Ancrene Wisse* is engaging and conversational, incorporating exclamations, rhetorical questions, calls for attention, and imagined speeches—as though the author were speaking directly to listeners. Some of these techniques may be borrowed from contemporary preaching. Indeed, the *Ancrene Wisse* frequently uses two devices thought to render sermons more stimulating to audiences: *similitudines*, or vivid images used as the basis for comparison, and *exempla*, short illustrative narratives. In some passages, the author plays on the contemporary vogue for exalted erotic love, so vividly realized in the *lais* of Marie de France (see [pp. 159–90](#))—though, of course, he redirects this love heavenward, toward God. Another feature of the style is the mingling of “high” and “low” vocabularies: for instance, quoting holy scripture alongside mention of the cook's son. In these several ways, the

Ancrene Wisse shapes the largely untested idioms of Middle English writing to achieve distinctive rhetorical and spiritual power.

The *Ancrene Wisse* is divided into eight parts. The selection below comes from Part 6, which concentrates on penance, or the actions and feelings proper to demonstrate contrite repentance for sin. At the point where the selection begins, the author is riffing on an episode from the story of Jesus's death and resurrection, when three of his followers, known as the three Marys, buy spices to anoint his dead body after the crucifixion—but when they arrive at his tomb, the body is gone and an angel announces that Jesus has risen. In the selection, phrases printed in *italics* appeared in Latin within the original language of the *Ancrene Wisse*.

From Ancrene Wisse (Guide for Anchoresses)¹

[THE SWEETNESS AND PAINS OF ENCLOSURE]

* * *

Now someone may complain that she cannot feel any inward fragrance or sweetness from God. She should not be at all surprised, if she is not Mary; because she must buy it with external bitterness. Not with every bitterness—because some lead away from God, such as every worldly grief that is not for the soul's salvation. That is why in the Gospel it is written of the three Marys as follows: *So that coming they might anoint Jesus*²*—but not going away.* These Marys, it says, these bitteresses, were coming to anoint our Lord.³ These [bitteresses] are coming to anoint him that one suffers for love of our Lord, who stretches himself towards us like something that has been anointed, and makes himself tender and soft to handle. And wasn't he himself enclosed in Mary's womb?⁴ These two things are appropriate for a recluse, constriction and bitterness; for the womb, where our Lord was enclosed, is a constricted space to live in, and this word 'Mary', as I have often said, means 'bitterness'. If, then, you endure bitterness in a constricted space, you are his companions, enclosed as he was in Mary's womb. Are you confined inside four spacious walls? So too was he in a narrow cradle, nailed on the cross, closely confined in a tomb of stone. Mary's womb and this tomb were his anchor-houses. He was not a worldly man in either, but, as it were, out of the world, to show anchoresses that they should have nothing in common with the world. 'Yes,' you answer me, 'but he went out of both.' Indeed; you should go out of both your anchor-houses just as he did, without a breach, and leave them both intact. That will be when the spirit goes out at the end,

intact and unblemished, from its two houses. One is the body; the other is the outer house, which is like the outer wall around the castle.

All that I have said about the mortification of the flesh is not for you, my dear sisters, who sometimes suffer more than I would like, but is for anyone who may perhaps read this and is too soft on herself. Even so, saplings are hedged round with thorns so animals do not eat them while they are tender. You are saplings planted in God's orchard. The thorns are the hardships that I have been talking about, and you need to be surrounded by them, so that the beast of hell, when he creeps up on you to bite you, hurts himself on the sharpness and recoils. In addition to all these hardships, be happy and content if you are not much talked about, if you are not valued; because a thorn is sharp and not valued. Be hedged round by these two things. You should not wish to have a bad reputation. Scandal is a mortal sin; that is, anything said or done in such a way that people can reasonably misconstrue it, and sin afterwards because of it through shameful thoughts, through malicious gossip about her, about others, and sin in deed as well. You ought rather to wish that there should be no talk about you, any more than there is of the dead, and be glad if you have to put up with the insolence of Slurry the cook's boy, who washes and wipes dishes in the kitchen; then you are mountains raised towards heaven. For look how the lady says in that sweet book of love, *My beloved is coming, leaping in the mountains, leaping over the hills.*⁵ 'My beloved', she says, 'is coming, leaping on the mountains, leaping over the hills.' The mountains signify those who lead the highest life; the hills are those who are lower. Now she says that her beloved leaps on the mountains; that is, tramples on them, fouls them, lets them be trodden down, shamefully maltreated, reveals in them his own footprints so that people should follow in them, discover how he was trodden down, as his footprints show. These are the high mountains, like the Alps or the mountains of Armenia. As the lady says, her beloved leaps over the hills, which are lower, and relies less on them because their weakness could not endure such trampling-down. And he leaps over

them, spares and avoids them until they grow higher, from hills into mountains. But at least his shadow passes over and covers them while he is leaping over them; that is, he casts on them some image of his life on earth, as if it were his shadow. But the mountains are imprinted with his own footmarks, and he shows in their life what his way of living was like, how and where he went, in what abasement, in what misery he led his life on earth. The virtuous Paul spoke of such mountains, and humbly said, *We are cast down but not destroyed, carrying around the mortification of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*⁶ 'We suffer all kinds of misery and shame,' he said, 'but that is our blessedness, that we bear Christ's mortification on our bodies, so that it may be revealed in us what his life on earth was like'. Certainly those who act like this prove to us their love for our Lord. 'Do you love me? Show it!' For love will show itself through external actions. *Gregory: The proof of love is its demonstration in practice.*⁷ However hard anything may be, true love makes it easy and smooth and pleasant. *Love makes everything easy.* What do men and women suffer for false love and for filthy love, and would gladly suffer more? And what is more amazing than that a love that is stable and true and sweeter than any other should have less power over us than the love of sin? Even so, I know someone who wears a heavy coat of mail and a hair-shirt,⁸ both together, tightly bound with iron around waist, thighs, and arms, with broad thick fetters, so that the sweat from it is agony to bear. He fasts, keeps vigil, labours, and, believe it or not, complains that it does not trouble him, and often asks me to teach him some way of making his body suffer. Everything that is bitter seems sweet to him for the love of our Lord. Heaven knows, he still complains to me of the most intense distress, and says that God is forgetting him because he does not send him any major illness. Certainly it is love that does that; because as he often says to me, it does not seem to him that for any harm that God might inflict on him, even if he threw him into hell with the damned, he could love him the less. If anybody suspects anything of this kind of him, he is more embarrassed than a thief caught in the

act. I also know a woman like this, who suffers little less. But all that can be done is to give thanks to God for the strength that he grants them, and humbly acknowledge our weakness. Let us love their goodness, and in that way it is our own; because as St Gregory says, love has so much strength that it makes others' goodness our own without any effort, as was said above. Now, it seems to me, we have arrived at the seventh part, which is all about the love that makes the heart pure.⁹

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is from Bella Millet, *Ancrene Wisse, Guide for Anchoresses: A Translation* (2009).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See Mark 16:1.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The author has previously explained that the name "Mary" signifies "bitterness," which he here associates with salvific suffering.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This statement refers to a different Mary: Jesus's mother, Mary, who is believed to have conceived her son miraculously, as a virgin.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Song of Songs 2:8.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: 1 Corinthians 4:9–10.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: From Homily 30 on the Gospels, by St. Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604; pope, 590–604).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A garment of extremely coarse cloth, designed to irritate the skin and worn as a means of penitential suffering. In this case, the pious man wears the hair-shirt under a suit of chainmail armor.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This is the final sentence of Part 6 of the *Guide*.[Return to reference 9](#)

CLEMENCE OF BARKING

fl. ca. 1180

The Life of Saint Catherine tells the story of a beautiful noblewoman who relies on her wit and courage to challenge a wicked emperor and remain faithful to her beloved. Described this way, Catherine sounds like the heroine of a chivalric romance, or one of the *lais* of Marie de France (see [pp. 159–90](#))—except that her lover is Jesus Christ and her story is written by a nun. “I who have translated her life am called Clemence by name. I am a nun at Barking. For the love of her I took this work in hand,” declares the author of the *Life*. This is the only biographical evidence we have for Clemence, but it tells us a good deal. She was evidently part of the community at Barking Abbey in the later twelfth century. Barking was a large and prosperous religious house first established in the seventh century and renowned for the learned women who lived there. Not only was Clemence an accomplished writer in Anglo-Norman French (the language of the *Life of Saint Catherine*), but she must have been an adroit Latinist as well: she explains that she adapted Catherine’s story by “transposing it from Latin into the vernacular, so that it will be more pleasing to those who hear it.” In the twelfth century, the community at Barking Abbey was closely connected to royal and noble circles, where romance literature circulated. Many distinctive elements of the *Life of Saint Catherine*—its intelligent and active heroine, its rhetoric of exalted love, the conflict between an individual and her society, and its rhyming octosyllabic couplets—are

shared with the contemporary romance tradition in Anglo-Norman French.

However, the *Life of Saint Catherine* also belongs to a genre quite different from romance. It is a hagiography, or “writing about the saint,” which recounts the death and miracles of a virgin martyr, someone killed for holding fast to the Christian faith. Here the protagonist is Catherine of Alexandria, thought to have been executed in the early fourth century under Roman rulers who were persecuting Christians. According to the account widely known in the Middle Ages, Catherine is imprisoned, tortured, and ultimately beheaded, but she miraculously suffers no pain, and the spectacle of her persecution leads many to convert to Christianity. In visual depictions, Catherine is often shown with a spiked “breaking wheel,” an instrument of torture, said to have miraculously shattered at her touch, as well as with the sword ultimately used to behead her and a book symbolizing her great learning. In the medieval period, hagiographic *vitae* (lives) of Christian saints constituted an exceedingly popular genre, and one of its pleasures for medieval readers was its unique combination of historical distance and identification. The bloody persecutions under Rome were almost a millennium distant from life at Barking Abbey. Nuns reading Clemence’s text might have marveled at the exotic, violent world depicted. But they could also identify themselves with Catherine’s virtue and faith, treating her heroic Christianity as an ideal as they faced spiritual struggles of their own.



Margo sca
 thrax
 na grece ge
 ma. urbe ale
 xandria co
 sti regis erat
 filia. **V** Dif
 fusa ē gratia
 in labris tu

16 **R** Propterea benedixit te deus
 in eternum. **Oratio**

Deus qui dedisti legem mor
 ti. in summitate montis
 synai et in eodem loco. per sanctos
 angelos tuos. corpus beate fra
 thrine uirginis et martiris tue
 mirabiliter collocasti tribue
 quesumus. ut eius meritis et
 intercessione ad montem qui
 christus est ualeamus perue
 ire. Per christum dominum no
 strum. Amen

De sancte marguerite. n.

Catherine of Alexandria, French prayer book, ca. 1490.

Catherine is depicted with a breaking wheel and sword, two instruments of her martyrdom, and with a book, representing her great learning.

Unlikely as it may sound, Clemence has made the *Life of Saint Catherine* a decidedly humorous text. Her Catherine is not only well-educated and eloquent but a satirical wit, skewering pagan beliefs to reveal their absurdity and elevate Christian doctrine. All of the emperor's attempts to hurt Catherine backfire, and his tyrannical violence ends up proving his own impotence and God's power. This development corresponds with a larger pattern of inversion and paradox, in which earthly riches are made worthless and (physical) death becomes (spiritual) life. Throughout the *Life*, Clemence foregrounds the power of Catherine's speech. Many visual and narrative depictions of virgin martyrs concentrate attention on the stripped and mutilated, but still beautiful, body of the saint (much like those texts in "God's Body," [pp. 215–84](#), that focus on Jesus Christ's wounded but exalted flesh). By contrast, Clemence de-emphasizes the bodily spectacle of Catherine's persecution. Her words dwell less on virgin lives and holy deaths and more on Catherine's own words, using them to represent a remarkably articulate heroine for a learned readership that would have included literate women.

From The Life of Saint Catherine¹

[CATHERINE DEBATES WITH THE EMPEROR AND HIS PHILOSOPHERS]

* * *

The king looked at the maiden and then addressed the clerks: 'Lords, what has happened to you? Have you all lost your wits? Why are you struck dumb and dismayed on account of a woman? Nothing like this has ever happened before. I think our gods do not care about us when you are all incapable of defending yourselves against a weak young girl. You are fifty men of great intellect, and against her you have no defence. There was never so great a shame as yours, if you are beaten. Lords,' he said, 'now reply. Defend my honour and my law, for we shall all end up being shamed if we do not win the victory.'

At this one of the clerks, who was very worthy and wise, replied: 'Truly,' he said, 'lord emperor, since our mothers bore us, we have never heard a woman speak so, or debate so wisely. She is not revealing foolish things to us, but matters full of truth. Her argument was mainly about the godhead.² No one with whom we might have debated was ever able to stand up to us so. He who thought himself wise at the outset thought himself a fool at the end. I have never seen a clerk, however skilled, whom I could not have forced to surrender. But I cannot refute her claims, for I see nothing wrong with them. It is no small thing that this lady advances against us. She speaks of the creator of the world and confounds our gods with the truth. We no longer know what to say to her, for our cause is false. We truly believe in her God, who created everything from nothing. From the moment this lady spoke to us about Jesus Christ's holy cross, his name, his power, his death and his birth, all our

wisdom fled and we were completely overcome. We believe in him with all our hearts; we shall say nothing else to you.'

The tyrant heard what he said and became very angry. He sighed deeply from the bottom of his heart and was filled with vexation. His heart became aflame with fierce rage. Then he commanded a great pyre to be constructed in the sight of all the inhabitants of the city and ordered the clerks to be bound and thrown into the fire all together. The pyre was quickly prepared and the clerks were seized and tightly bound. They were all soon led towards the blaze, but they did not fear a thing. One began to call out and cried to his fellows: 'Oh, dear companions, what shall we do, now that we believe in the good God who has done us such great honour that we have abandoned our error, who shows us the right way to live and who invites us to come to him by way of martyrdom? Let us first have ourselves baptized and blessed with his holy cross before we lose this life, which we lead with great sorrow.' Everyone cried out with one voice and called upon God's beloved to regenerate and cleanse them through baptism.

The maiden comforted them in kindly fashion and exhorted them to good deeds. 'Lords,' she said, 'do not be afraid. Take comfort in the creator and, I beg you, have no anxiety about baptism, my dear friends.³ You are all washed in the blood of God and reborn through his death. Through the flame which you see here you will receive the Holy Spirit.' With that the men-at-arms arrived and dragged the clerks towards the fire. They threw them in with great fury, and in that way they suffered their martyrdom on the thirteenth day of November, for love of the good creator who never forgets his faithful servants. He is always ready to help them, for in their life and in their death his support never fails them. Blessed is he who serves him well, for this service is never in vain.

Lords,⁴ you have heard very clearly how these martyrs met their end. Their suffering ended in death and thereby they gained true life. Through this death they escaped the eternal death in which they lived before. For if they had not put their belief in God, they would all have been eternally lost. But the good lord did not wish

them to have to perish in that way. Through his grace, which encompasses everything, he drew them to him in his mercy.

I wish to recount a miracle which God deigned to perform on their behalf. Those who were thrown into the fire and had lain there for a long time were not in the slightest injured or consumed by the flame, nor was their fine colour spoilt or their clothing damaged. The good Jesus so protected them that not a single hair on their head was harmed. Their complexions appeared so fresh that you would not have realized they were dead. Such a lord is deserving of love who can so honour his own. He feeds the souls in heaven above and honours the bodies here below. He feeds them there by his presence and preserves their bodies here by his power. His mercy is very great and his goodness ineffable, since he maintains his friends in this way and draws his enemies to him. Whoever hates him he loves dearly, and anyone who flees him he calls back. Oh, how gentle he is and how good, since he never fails his own! He governs everything, and everything is his, for he alone is good in all ways. Everything he has created is good, for all things experience his goodness. He never created anything without its experiencing his excellence. All things were created good, no matter how they have since changed. God never created anything bad, and it would be great folly to dare to say that individuals are predestined to sin against their will, or that they are forced to do evil in spite of a wish to avoid it. Everyone ought to blame themselves for the evil they do and thank God for the good. For it is from him alone that our good comes; he alone can curb evil. He binds evil and destroys it, and his great goodness is experienced by all. These clerks experienced his goodness when they converted to him; they came to scorn him, and he made them convert to him. He loved them; they hated him. He pursued them; they fled from him. He reached them with his goodness and brought them back to the rightful truth. Through death he called them to life, and with his help they won it indeed. Through death they had to seek life, and through their battle they won peace. The good God who deigned to save them did not wish to forget their bodies. He rewarded their souls and kept their bodies from the flames. They

remained whole and beautiful; the flame was never able to touch them. Many who saw this miracle converted to God's law. The Christians removed the bodies by night and buried them all.

The tyrant saw what was happening and he found it extremely distressing and hard to bear. The shame he had undergone filled him with anguish, but when he saw that nothing could be done, he turned towards the maiden. He addressed her with these words: 'Oh, fair maiden, how lovely your face is. Those eyes are so well set; they always seem to have a wise smile in them. No mortal woman born on this earth can be compared to you in beauty. A mantle of royal purple would be very fitting for that beautiful body. Now consider your youth and follow our true path. It would certainly make me very happy if you would believe me. I suffer greatly on your account, fair one, since you scorn our law and consider our gods false and worthless and full of the enemy's cunning. Fair friend, leave this be, for you have good reason to fear that they may take vengeance on you; they are very merciful in their patience. If you were to take my advice, you would sacrifice to our gods. You will certainly have great honour from doing so. You will be in second palace in my place, and together with the queen you will possess all my realm, except for her dowry, for I do not wish to wrong her in that regard. No distinction will be made between you except for the bed in which she will lie. Those whom you wish to honour in court will truly be able to boast of honour and no one will be able to elevate those whom you wish to abase. I shall do even more for you if you will do what I wish. I shall have an image cast and have it honoured in your name. It will stand in the middle of my palace and hold a beautiful sceptre in its hand; all those who see it will greet it with humility. If there is anyone so bold as to pass by without a salutation, he will be considered as guilty as anyone who desired to harm me. No one will have committed a crime so great that it cannot be immediately pardoned if he has bowed low to this image and cried to it for mercy. I shall do you still greater honour, so that no one could do greater. In addition to my other promises, among the temples built for the goddesses I shall make one of marble in

your name; no one will ever have seen one richer.' This he said and a good deal more besides.

The lady heard what he said and smiled. Very politely she said to him, by way of a witty little joke: 'Oh, how fortunate I am, since I am to be turned into gold! I'll have a statue in my name, and people will humbly venerate me. I shall be cast entirely in gold and adored like a goddess. It will suit me quite well, even if it is made of silver. If it is of a baser metal, upon my word, there is no harm in that. Whatever the metal it is cast in, I shall be hugely honoured by it, and you will be able to cast a body for it but without being able to give it life. Now tell me, if you can, the source and nature of the matter which makes mortal bodies live and gives them sight and hearing, so that they can speak and hear, walk, see and feel. If my statue does not possess such capabilities, its body will certainly be of little value. Its wisdom will be of little use to it since it cannot hear or speak. Now you will perhaps reply that this statue, which will be made in my name and worshipped by your followers, will bring me great glory. Oh, what honour they will do me when they speak such praise of me as "This is Catherine who abandoned her God and her faith". King, I do not care for such honour, for praise like that is really blame. Emperor, as long as you live, you will be able to force your men to do this honour to me, either from fear or love of you, but tell me what the birds which fly over me will do? Will they spare me on your account, so as not to alight on me? In no time at all they will have pecked out my eyes and sullied my shining face. Even your dogs will abuse me. Such, king, is your praise. Therefore, I say to you, emperor, that you should abandon your error, for it is worldly glory and folly. Anyone who believes this is certainly very foolish. I shall not believe you, now or ever, so you labour in vain. For Jesus Christ, my bridegroom, so desires my love that the two of us have already made a covenant that I am his beloved and he is my lover. He is my renown and my honour; he is my glory and my worth. He is my pleasure and my comfort, my sweetness and my delight. I love him so much that I cannot be parted from him; for I love him alone, and him alone do I desire. I am fully aware that he loves me in

return and I for my part love him with such faith that I shall never abandon him for anything which anyone may say to me.'

* * *

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is from Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Glyn S. Burgess, *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths* (1996).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Essence or substance of God.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Christian doctrine requires baptism to enter the kingdom of God, but martyrdom could act equivalently, as Catherine assures the philosophers.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Clemence's use of the masculine "Lords" (in Anglo-Norman French, *segnurs*) suggests that she does not envision an audience made up exclusively of other nuns.[Return to reference 4](#)

GOD'S BODY

The literary and visual representation of the godhead is necessarily, in any religion, a powerful index of religious culture. In some religions, indeed, visual representation of God is such a sensitive issue that it is forbidden altogether. Christian culture has experienced moments of severe hostility to visual representation (for example, in the Reformation period of the sixteenth century), but has, in general, permitted images of God (and especially of God-become-man, Christ). In the later Middle Ages in Europe, the bodily representation of Christ became a central preoccupation for writers, readers, and visual artists.

In the late eleventh century, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1099) developed a new conception of the Atonement (“at-one-ment”), the act whereby humans are reconciled with God after the separation caused by Original Sin. An earlier theory had posited that the Atonement was the solution to a dispute between God and the Devil concerning property rights over mankind. In his tract *Why Did Christ Become Man?* Anselm argued instead that the real center of the Atonement was mankind’s moral responsibility to pay God back. Humanity needed to repay God for the sin committed, but was unable to do so. Faced with this impasse, God could either simply abolish the debt, or else *become human*, in order to repay himself, as it were. God chose this latter route, allowing Christ to suffer and die as a human in order to clear the debt.

Earlier representations of the Crucifixion had tended to place the accent on Christ as impassive king, standing erect on the Cross,

come to claim his property of mankind. In *The Dream of the Rood* (see [pp. 33–37](#)), for example, Christ's suffering is for the most part absorbed by the Cross itself, while Christ is represented as a conquering, royal hero. Later medieval representations of Christ, by contrast, accentuate the suffering, sagging, lacerated body of a very human God. In this newly conceived theology, Christ's suffering humanity takes center stage. The artistic significance of this massively influential development was itself massive. Certainly the older tradition survived in vital form: compare, for example, the triumphalist lyric "What is he, this lordling, that cometh from the fight?" with the quiet suffering of "Ye that pasen by the weye." Langland's Christ, too, comes to claim his property as a conquering hero. It was, nonetheless, the tradition of Christ suffering in his humanity that dominated literary and visual art from the thirteenth century until the Reformation began in 1517.

These theological developments had forceful artistic and stylistic consequences. Because the theology was best expressed through visual or verbal images, it fed readily into both painting and a highly pictorial literature. In both painting and literature, a humble style, focusing on the particularities of bodily pain and grief, became the bearer of high theological significance. The painting of Giotto (1266?–1337), for example, broke with a prior tradition of painting that represented an elegant Christ against a splendid gold background; Giotto's inelegant and crucified Christ suffers under the pull of his own weight. Spiritual experience was, in the first instance, something *seen* more than something *thought*. It was also a spirituality rooted in the dramatic present: as one saw Christ, one saw him in the here and now. Thus works in this almost cinematic mode foreshorten historical and geographical distance: such texts encourage readers, that is, to imagine that they are physically and emotionally present at the crucial scenes of Christ's life. In some examples of the tradition, viewers are encouraged to imagine those around Christ (especially Romans and Jews) as wholly responsible for the infliction of pain; in others, viewers are made to realize that they are themselves responsible for the continued suffering of Christ.

As deployed by the Church, this movement discouraged abstract thought. It did nevertheless have the effect of widening access to spiritual experience, and, in ways unforeseen by official sponsors of such piety, could be the springboard for sophisticated theology. As the Church attempted to deepen the spiritual literacy of its members from the late twelfth century on, emphasis on Christ's humanity in art and literature opened powerful spiritual experience to a much wider audience of readers and viewers. To engage in this spirituality, a public did not need to be versed in detailed matters of doctrine. Instead, a reader or viewer had to develop the capacity for sympathetic response to physical suffering. Such spirituality gained official impetus through the foundation of the Franciscan order of friars (1223), who promoted earthly poverty in imitation of, and emotional response to, Christ's sufferings. The centrality of Christ's living presence in the liturgy was, furthermore, reaffirmed and extended with the establishment, throughout Christendom, of the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Body of Christ), first proclaimed by the pope in 1264 and again in 1311. This feast celebrated the Eucharistic host, or wafer, as Christ's body. It grew steadily in popularity and came to involve outdoor processions depicting the biblical foreshadowings of the Eucharist, as a prelude to display of the Eucharist itself. In some medieval English cities this was the day also chosen for the performance of cycle plays, sometimes known as the plays of Corpus Christi.

Female readers in particular, who had been excluded from the Latin-based, textual traditions of theology, discovered fertile ground in this tradition of so-called affective, or emotional, piety. Through such emotive imagining, one gained an apparently unmediated, and potentially authoritative, relation with Christ. But women working in this tradition did not necessarily remain within its visual, imaginative terms: Julian of Norwich is, for example, capable of developing subtle and abstract thought, holding the incarnate image in view all the while.

This powerfully emotional piety also provoked wider social applications of the Christian narrative. Whereas "The Parable of the

Christ Knight" in the *Ancrene Wisse* presents a suffering Christ as an aristocratic lover for a select spiritual elite of women, the Christ of Margery Kempe is very much the "homely" husband of a bourgeois woman (see in particular Book 1, Chapter 36). On a much larger scale, the mystery plays mark the moment in which urban institutions represent Christ for themselves. In these dramas, both Old and New Testament narrative is inflected by the trials of domestic and urban experience (on the origins, civic sponsorship, and production of these plays, see the introduction to "Mystery Plays," [p. 247](#)).

MIDDLE ENGLISH INCARNATION AND CRUCIFIXION LYRICS

Many religious lyrics were written down and preserved. These were mostly written by anonymous clerics, but in rare instances we know at least the name of an author. Seventeen poems by the Franciscan William Herebert are collected in a single manuscript. In his dramatic lyric printed here, the main speaker is the Christ-knight, returning from the Crucifixion, which is treated as a battle the way it is in *The Dream of the Rood* and in Passus 18 of *Piers Plowman*. The famous image from Isaiah 63:2 of the figure treading grapes in a winepress is compared to Christ in his blood-stained garments.

The religious lyrics are for the most part devotional poems that depend on the Latin Bible and liturgy of the Church. "What is he, this lordling . . . ," the passage from Isaiah adapted by Herebert, was part of a lesson in a mass performed during Holy Week. But the diction of that poem, though there are a few French loanwords, is predominantly of English origin. Many of the poems, like Herebert's, contain an element of drama: "Ye That Pasen by the Weye" is spoken by Christ from the Cross to all wayfarers; similar verses are spoken by the crucified Christ to the crowd (as well as to the audience) in the mystery plays of the Crucifixion.

Among the most beautiful and tender lyrics are those about the Virgin Mary, who is the greatest of all queens and ladies. They celebrate Mary's joys, sorrows, and the mystery of her virgin motherhood. "Sunset on Calvary," a tableau of Mary at the foot of

the Cross, contains an implicit play upon English "sun," which is setting, and the "son," who is dying but, like the sun, will rise again. Like love songs, the Marian lyrics often celebrate the mysteries of the natural world and thus defy any simple division of medieval lyric into "secular" or "religious" poetry. "I Sing of a Maiden" visualizes the conception of Jesus in terms of the falling dew, and he steals silently to her bower like a lover. "Adam Lay Bound" cheerfully treats the original sin as though it were a child's theft of an apple, which had the happy result of making Mary the Queen of Heaven. "The Corpus Christi Carol" has the form of a lullaby but penetrates by stages to the heart of a mystery similar to the Holy Grail, the chalice that contained Christ's blood, which continues to flow, as it does in this carol, for humanity's salvation.

What is he, this lordling, that cometh from the fight¹

- “What is he, this lordling,² that cometh from the
fight
With blood-rede wede so grislich ydight,³
So faire ycountised,^o so semelich in sight,⁴
So stiflich he gangeth,⁵ so doughty^o a knight?”
- 5 “Ich^o it am, ich it am, that ne speke but right,⁶
Champioun to helen^o mankinde in fight.”
- “Why then is thy shroud rede, with blood al ymeind,
As troddares in wringe with must al bespreind?”⁷
- 10 “The wring ich have ytrodded al myself one^o
And of^o al mankinde was none other wone.^o
Ich hem⁸ have ytrodded in wrathe and in game,^o
And al my wede is bespreind with here blood
ysame,⁹
And al my robe yfouled^o to here grete shame.
The day of th’ilke wreche¹ liveth in my thought;
- 15 The yeer of medes yelding ne foryet ich nought.²
Ich looked al aboute some helping mon;³
Ich soughte al the route,⁴ but help nas ther non.
It was mine owne strengthe that this bote^o wrought,
Mine owne doughtinesse that help ther me brought.⁵
- 20 Ich have ytrodded the folk in wrathe and in game,
Adreint al with shennesse, ydrawe down with
shame.” ⁶

"On Godes milsfulnesse^o ich wil bethenche me,⁷
And herien^o him in alle thing that he yeldeth^o me."

Endnotes

- Note 1: The poem, by William Herebert (d. 1333), paraphrases Isaiah 63:1–7, in which the "lordling" (lord's son) is a messianic figure returning from battle against the Edomites.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Who is this lord's son?[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: With blood-red garment, so terribly arrayed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: So fair to behold.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: So boldly he goes.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Who speaks only what is right.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Why then is thy garment red, all stained with blood, like treaders in the winepress all spattered with must (the juice of the grapes).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Them, that is, humankind symbolized by the grapes in the press. Compare line 20.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: And my garment is all spattered with their blood together.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That same vengeance (perhaps Judgment Day).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: I do not forget the year of paying wages.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: I looked all around for some man to help (me).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: I searched the whole crowd.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: My own valor brought help to me there.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: All drowned with ignominy, pulled down with shame.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: I will bethink myself.[Return to reference 7](#)

Notes

- °: *appareled*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *valiant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *save*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hope*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soiled*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mercy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *praise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gives*[Return to reference](#) °

Ye That Pasen by the Weye

Ye that pasen by the weye,
Abidet a little stounde.^o
Beholdet, all my felawes,
Yif^o any me lik is founde.⁸
5 To the tre with nailes thre
Wol^o fast I hange bounde;
With a spere all thoru my side
To mine herte is made a wounde.

Endnotes

- Note 8: Lines 1–4 paraphrase Lamentations 1:12. [Return to reference 8](#)

Notes

- °: *while* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *if* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *very* [Return to reference °](#)

Sunset on Calvary

Now gooth sunne under wode:⁹

Me reweth,¹ Marye, thy faire rode._°

Now gooth sunne under tree:

Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee.

Endnotes

- Note 9: Both the woods and the wooden Cross.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: I pity.[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *face*[Return to reference °](#)

I Sing of a Maiden

I sing of a maiden
That is makelees:²
King of alle kinges
To^o her sone she chees.^o

5 He cam also^o stille
Ther^o his moder^o was
As dewe in Aprille
That falleth on the gras.

10 He cam also stille
To his modres bowr
As dewe in Aprille
That falleth on the flowr.

15 He cam also stille
Ther his moder lay
As dewe in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

20 Moder and maiden
Was nevere noon but she:
Wel may swich^o a lady
Godes moder be.

Endnotes

- Note 2: Spotless, matchless, and mateless—a triple pun.[Return to reference 2](#)

Notes

- °: *as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chose* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mother* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *such* [Return to reference](#) °

Adam Lay Bound

Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond,
Four thousand winter thoughte he not too long;
And al was for an apple, an apple that he took,
As clerkes finden writen, writen in hire book.
5 Ne hadde^o the apple taken been, the apple taken
been,
Ne hadde nevere Oure Lady ybeen hevene Queen.
Blessed be the time that apple taken was:
Therefore we mown^o singen *Deo Gratias*.³

Endnotes

- Note 3: Thanks be to God (Latin). [Return to reference 3](#)

Notes

- ^o: *had not* [Return to reference](#) ^o
- ^o: *may* [Return to reference](#) ^o

The Corpus Christi Carol

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,
The faucon^o hath borne my make^o away.

He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.

5 In that orchard ther was an hall
That was hanged with purple and pall.^o

And in that hall ther was a bed:
It was hanged with gold so red.

10 And in that bed ther lith^o a knight,
His woundes bleeding by day and night.

By that beddes side ther kneeleth a may,^o
And she weepeth both night and day.

And by that beddes side ther standeth a stoon^o
*Corpus Christ*⁴ written thereon.

Endnotes

- Note 4: Body of Christ (Latin). [Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- ^o: *falcon* [Return to reference](#) ^o
- ^o: *mate* [Return to reference](#) ^o
- ^o: *black velvet* [Return to reference](#) ^o
- ^o: *lies* [Return to reference](#) ^o

- °: *maid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stone*[Return to reference](#) °

JULIAN OF NORWICH

ca. 1342–ca. 1416

The “Showings,” or “Revelations” as they are also called, were sixteen mystical visions received by the woman known as Julian of Norwich. The name may be one that she adopted when she became an anchoress in a cell attached to the church of St. Julian that still stands in that city in East Anglia, then one of the most important English cities. An anchorite (m.) or anchoress (f.) is a religious recluse confined to an enclosure, which he or she has vowed never to leave. At the time of such an enclosing the burial service was performed, signifying that the enclosed person was dead to the world and that the enclosure corresponded to a grave. The point of this confinement was, of course, to pursue more actively the contemplative or spiritual life. The thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (see [pp. 206–10](#)) served as a guide to such a life.

Julian may well have belonged to a religious order at the time that her visions led her to choose the life of an anchoress. We know little about her except what she tells us in her writings. She is, however, very precise about the date of her visions. They occurred, she tells us, at the age of thirty and a half on May 13, 1373. Four extant wills bequeath sums for Julian’s maintenance in her anchorage. The most important document witnessing her life is *The Book of Margery Kempe* (see [p. 232](#), below). Kempe asked Julian whether there might be any deception in Kempe’s own visions, “for the anchoress,” she says, “was expert in such things.” Kempe’s

description of Julian's conversation accords well with the doctrines and personality that emerge from Julian's own book.

A Book of Showings survives in a short and a long version. The longer text, from which the following excerpts are taken, was the product of fifteen and more years of meditation on the meaning of the visions in which much had been obscure to Julian. Apparently the mystical experiences were never repeated, but through constant study and contemplation the showings acquired a greater clarity, richness, and profundity as they continued to be turned over in a mind both gifted with spiritual insight and learned in theology. Her editors document her extensive use of the Bible and her familiarity with medieval religious writings in both English and Latin.

Julian's sixteen revelations are each treated in uneven numbers of chapters; these groupings of chapters form an extended meditation on a given vision. Each vision is treated with an unpredictable combination of visual description of what Julian saw, the words she was offered, and the meanings she "saw." Her visions are, in her words, "ghostly" (that is, spiritual), "bodily," and subtle combinations of the two. They embrace powerful visual phenomena such as blood drops running from the crown of thorns and revelations that take place in pure mind. All are, nevertheless, "seen"; the spiritualized meanings do not render bodily sights redundant.

Of the selections here, [Chapters 3](#) and [86](#) are from the opening and closing sequences of the work; [Chapters 4](#), [5](#), and [7](#) are from the First Vision; [Chapter 27](#), from the Thirteenth Vision; and [Chapters 58, 59, 60, and 61](#), from the great Fourteenth Vision.

Julian's First Vision is rooted in, but moves beyond, the tradition of affective piety described in the headnote to this section on [pages 215–16](#). The vision is provoked by Julian's own bodily approximation to the bodily pains of Christ, as she thinks she is dying. The crucifix offered for her comfort provokes a kinetic, fresh response, as it seems to move into life, bleeding and persuading Julian that the vision is God's unmediated gift to her. Julian moves well beyond this initial sight, however; she sees a sequence of created things: the Virgin Mary as the best creature that God made, and, lower down

the scale, the entire world in her palm, "the quantity of an hazelnut." Such a vision might lead away from created things altogether into a realm of pure essence; significantly, it does not, precisely because Julian never leaves the sight of the wounded, bodily Christ, whose physical suffering is somehow simultaneous with these almost immaterial visions. Julian strains the tradition of affective piety to its limits, but ends by transforming rather than rejecting it.



Reading and Vision. *The Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, ca. 1475. This extraordinary and utterly impossible view makes perfect sense as a vision of what the woman envisions from her reading.

The serene optimism Julian's visions express for the material, created world and for fallen creatures extends into the most daring and surprising realms of speculation. "Sin is behovely": these are (Julian's) Christ's own words. They are expressed in the Thirteenth Vision for the first time ([Chapter 27](#)), but only in the extended, daring meditation of the Fourteenth Vision (not included in the shorter version of *The Book of Showings*) are they given their deepest sense. At the heart of Julian's profoundly optimistic theology is a transformative understanding of Christ's humanity. She develops, without ever mentioning it explicitly, the idea of the *felix culpa*: the notion that, given its happy consequence in Christ's redemption of mankind, Adam's sin, or *culpa*, was somehow "happy" (*felix*). Christ is so much a part of us, by Julian's account, that he is "the ground of our kind [natural/kind] making" ([Chapter 59](#)). He is our mother, who strains and suffers as he gives birth to our salvation. Julian's concept of Jesus as mother has antecedents in both the Old and New Testaments, in medieval theology, and in the writings of medieval mystics (both men and women), but nowhere else in Middle English writing is the concept so subtly and resonantly explored.

Julian was clearly aware of the dangers of expressing such high mysteries as a woman writer. She participates, it is true, in a late medieval tradition of visionary writing, often by women, such as the *Dialogue* of Catherine of Siena (translated into Middle English as the *Orchard of Syon*) and the *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden (also translated into Middle English). Julian, however, does not refer to these figures; instead, she negotiates the difficulties and dangers of writing as a woman with enormous tact and shrewdness, both disclaiming and creating exceptional authority. Part of her strategy is to write with calm lucidity; part is to claim that the vision is not particular to her alone. Precisely by virtue of a common humanity, the visions are common property: "We are all one, and I am sure I saw it for the profit of many others."

From A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich^{[1](#)}

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is based on that given by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S.J., for the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto (1978), but it has been freely edited and modern spelling has been used where possible.[Return to reference 1](#)

Chapter 3

[JULIAN'S BODILY SICKNESS AND THE WOUNDS OF CHRIST]

And when I was thirty year old and a half, God sent me a bodily sickness in the which I lay three days and three nights; and on the fourth night I took all my rites of holy church, and went² not to have liven till day. And after this I lay two days and two nights; and on the third night I weened³ oftentimes to have passed,⁴ and so weened they that were with me. And yet in this I felt a great loathsomeness⁵ to die, but for nothing that was on earth that me liketh to live for, ne⁶ for no pain that I was afraid of, for I trusted in God of his mercy. But it was for I would have lived to have loved God better and longer time, that I might by the grace of that living have the more knowing and loving of God in the bliss of heaven. For me thought⁷ all that time that I had lived here so little and so short in regard of ⁸ that endless bliss, I thought: Good Lord, may my living no longer be to thy worship?⁹ And I understood by my reason and by the feeling of my pains that I should die; and I assented fully with all the will of my heart to be at God's will.

Thus I endured till day, and by then was my body dead from the middes downward, as to my feeling.¹ Then was I holpen² to be set upright, underset³ with help, for to have the more freedom of my heart to be at God's will, and thinking on God while my life lasted. My curate was sent for to be at my ending, and before he came I had set up my eyen⁴ and might not speak. He set the cross before my face and said: "I have brought the image of thy savior; look thereupon and comfort thee therewith." Me thought I was well, for my eyen was set upright into heaven, where I trusted to come by the mercy of God; but nevertheless I assented to set my eyen in the

face of the crucifix, if I might, and so I did, for me thought I might longer dure to look even forth than right up.⁵ After this my sight began to fail. It waxed as dark about me in the chamber as if it had been night, save in the image of the cross, wherein held a common light; and I wist⁶ not how. All that was beside the cross was ugly and fearful to me as⁷ it had been much occupied with fiends.

After this the over⁸ part of my body began to die so farforth that unneth⁹ I had any feeling. My most pain was shortness of breath and failing of life. Then went¹ I verily to have passed. And in this suddenly all my pain was taken from me, and I was as whole, and namely in the over part of my body, as ever I was before. I marvelled of this sudden change, for me thought that it was a privy working of God, and not of kind;² and yet by feeling of this ease I trusted never more to have lived, ne the feeling of this ease was no full ease to me, for me thought I had liever³ have been delivered of this world, for my heart was willfully set thereto.

Then came suddenly to my mind that I should desire the second wound of our Lord's gift and of his grace, that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of his blessed passion, as I had before prayed,⁴ for I would that his pains were my pains, with compassion and afterward longing to God. Thus thought me that I might with his grace have the wounds that I had before desired; but in this I desired never no bodily sight ne no manner showing of God, but compassion as me thought that a kind soul might have with our Lord Jesu, that for love would become a deadly⁵ man. With him I desired to suffer, living in my deadly body, as God would give me grace.

Endnotes

- Note 2: Thought.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Supposed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Died.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Reluctance.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Nor.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: I thought, [it] thought me.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In comparison with.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Glory.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: As it felt to me.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Helped.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Supported.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Eyes.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Endure to look straight ahead than straight up.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Knew.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: As if.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Upper.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: To the extent that scarcely.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Thought.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Nature.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Rather.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Julian had prayed for three gifts: direct experience of Christ's passion, mortal sickness, and the wounds of true contrition, loving compassion, and a willed desire for God.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Mortal.[Return to reference 5](#)

Chapter 4

[CHRIST'S PASSION AND INCARNATION]

And in this suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the garland, hot and freshly, plenteously and lively, right as it was in the time that the garland of thorns was pressed on his blessed head. Right so, both God and man, the same that suffered for me, I conceived truly and mightily that it was himself that shewed it me without any mean.⁶

And in the same showing suddenly the Trinity fulfilled my heart most of joy, and so I understood it shall be in heaven without end to all that shall come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our keeper, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is endless joy and our bliss, by our Lord Jesu Christ, and in our Lord Jesu Christ. And this was showed in the first sight and in all, for where Jesu appeareth, the blessed Trinity is understand, as to my sight.⁷ And I said, "*Benedicite dominums.*"⁸ This I said for reverence in my meaning,⁹ with a mighty voice, and full greatly was I astoned¹ for wonder and marvel that I had, that he that is so reverend and so dreadful² will be so homely³ with a sinful creature living in this wretched flesh.

Thus I took it for that time that our Lord Jesu of his courteous love would show me comfort before the time of my temptation; for me thought it might well be that I should by the sufferance of God and with his keeping be tempted of⁴ fiends before I should die. With this sight of his blessed passion, with the godhead that I saw in my understanding, I knew well that it was strength enough to me, yea, and to all creatures living that should be saved, against all the fiends of hell, and against all ghostly⁵ enemies.

In this he brought our Lady Saint Mary to my understanding; I saw her ghostly in bodily likeness, a simple maiden and a meek, young of age, a little waxen above a child,⁶ in the stature as she was

when she conceived. Also God showed me in part the wisdom and the truth of her soul, wherein I understood the reverend beholding, that she beheld her God, that is her maker, marvelling with great reverence that he would be born of her that was a simple creature of his making. And this wisdom and truth, knowing the greatness of her maker and the littlehead⁷ of herself that is made, made her to say full meekly to Gabriel: "Lo me here, God's handmaiden."⁸ In this sight I did understand verily that she is more than all that God made beneath her in worthiness and in fullhead;⁹ for above her is nothing that is made but the blessed manhood of Christ, as to my sight.

Endnotes

- Note 6: Intermediary.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Is understood, as I see it.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Blessed be the Lord (Latin).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Intention.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Astonished.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Awe-inspiring.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Familiar, intimate (the quality of being "at home").[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: By.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Spiritual.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Grown a little older than a child.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Littleness.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: See Luke 1:38.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Perfection.[Return to reference 9](#)

Chapter 5

[ALL CREATION AS A HAZELNUT]

In this same time that I saw this sight of the head bleeding, our good Lord showed a ghostly sight of his homely loving. I saw that he is to us all thing that is good and comfortable to our help. He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth us¹ and all beclothes us, hangeth about us for tender love that² he may never leave us. And so in this sight I saw that he is all thing that is good, as to my understanding.

And in this he showed a little thing, the quantity of an hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as me seemed, and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marvelled how it might last, for me thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for³ littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it; and so hath all thing being by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second that God loveth it, the third that God keepeth⁴ it. But what beheld I therein? Verily, the maker, the keeper, the lover. For till I am substantially united to him⁵ I may never have full rest ne very⁶ bliss; that is to say that I be so fastened to him that there be right nought that is made between my God and me.

This little thing that is made, me thought it might have fallen to nought for littleness. Of this needeth us to have knowledge, that us liketh nought all thing that is made, for to love and have God that is unmade.⁷ For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of heart and of soul, for we seek here rest in this thing that is so little, where no rest is in, and we know not our God, that is almighty, all wise and all good, for he is very rest. God will be known, and him liketh that we rest us in him; for all that is beneath him suffiseth not to us. And

this is the cause why that no soul is in rest till it is noughted of all things that is made.⁸ When she is wilfully⁹ noughted for love, to have him that is all, then is she able to receive ghostly rest.

And also our good Lord showed that it is full great pleasance to him that a sely¹ soul come to him naked, plainly and homely. For this is the kind² yearning of the soul by the touching of the Holy Ghost, as by the understanding that I have in this showing: God of thy goodness gave me thyself, for thou art enough to me, and I may ask nothing that is less that may be full worship to thee. And if I ask any thing that is less, ever me wanteth;³ but only in thee I have all.

And these words of the goodness of God be full lovesome to the soul and full near touching the will of our Lord, for his goodness fulfilleth all his creatures and all his blessed works and overpasseth⁴ without end. For he is the endlesshead and he made us only to himself and restored us by his precious passion,⁵ and ever keepeth us in his blessed love; and all this is of his goodness.

* * *

Endnotes

- Note 1: Envelops us and embraces us.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: So that.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Because of.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Looks after.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Joined to him in “substance,” which Julian regards as the eternal essence of being.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: True.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, we need to know that we should not be attracted to earthly things, which are made, to love and possess God, who is not made, who exists eternally.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Emptied of (its attachment to) all created things.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Of its free will.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Innocent.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Natural.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: I am forever lacking.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Surpasses.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Suffering.[Return to reference 5](#)

Chapter 7

[CHRIST AS HOMELY AND COURTEOUS]

And in all that time that he showed this that I have now said in ghostly sight, I saw the bodily sight lasting of the plenteous bleeding of the head. The great drops of blood fell down fro under the garland like pellets, seeming as it had come out of the veins. And in the coming out they were brown red, for the blood was full thick; and in the spreading abroad they were bright red. And when it came at the brows, there they vanished; and not withstanding the bleeding continued till many things were seen and understood. Nevertheless the fairhead and livelihead continued in the same beauty and liveliness.

The plenteoushead is like to the drops of water that fall of the evesing⁶ of an house after a great shower of rain, that fall so thick that no man may number them with no bodily wit.⁷ And for the roundness they were like to the scale of herring in the spreading of the forehead.

These three things came to my mind in the time: pellets for the roundhead⁸ in the coming out of the blood, the scale of the herring for the roundhead in the spreading, the drops of the evesing of a house for the plenteoushead unnumerable. This showing was quick⁹ and lively and hideous and dreadful and sweet and lovely; and of all the sight that I saw this was most comfort to me, that our good Lord, that is so reverend and dreadful, is so homely and so courteous, and this most fulfilled me with liking and sickness¹ in soule.

And to the understanding of this he showed this open example. It is the most worship² that a solemn king or a great lord may do to a poor servant if he will be homely with him; and namely if he show it himself of a full true meaning³ and with a glad cheer both in private and openly. Then thinketh this poor creature thus: "Lo, what

might this noble lord do more worship and joy to me than to show to me that am so little this marvelous homeliness? Verily, it is more joy and liking to me than if he gave me great gifts and were himself strange in manner." This bodily example was showed so high that this man's heart might be ravished and almost forget himself for joy of this great homeliness.

Thus it fareth by our Lord Jesu and by us, for verily it is the most joy that may be, as to my sight, that he that is highest and mightiest, noblest and worthiest, is lowest and meekest, homeliest and courtesousest. And truly and verily this marvelous joy shall he show us all when we shall see him. And this will our good Lord that we believe and trust, joy and like, comfort us and make solace as we may with his grace and with his help, into⁴ the time that we see it verily. For the most fullhead of joy that we shall have, as to my sight, is this marvelous courtesy and homeliness of our fader,⁵ that is our maker, in our Lord Jesu Christ, that is our brother and our saviour. But this marvelous homeliness may no man know in this life, but if he have it by special showing of our Lord, or of great plenty of grace inwardly given of the Holy Ghost. But faith and belief with charity deserve the meed,⁶ and so it is had by grace. For in faith with hope and charity our life is grounded. The showing is made to whom that God will, plainly teacheth the same opened and declared, with many privy points belonging to our faith and belief which be worshipful to be known. And when the showing which is given for a time is passed and hid, then faith keepeth it by grace of the Holy Ghost into our life's end. And thus by the showing it is none other than the faith, ne less ne more, as it may be seen by our Lord's meaning in the same matter, by then⁷ it come to the last end.

Endnotes

- Note 6: Eaves.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Intelligence.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Roundness.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Vivid.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Security.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Honor.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Intent.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Until.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Father. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Reward. "Charity": love. See 1 Corinthians 13:13.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: By the time that.[Return to reference 7](#)

Chapter 27

[SIN IS FITTING]

And after this our Lord brought to my mind the longing that I had to him before; and I saw nothing letted⁸ me but sin, and so I beheld generally in us all, and me thought that if sin had not been, we should all have been clean⁹ and like to our Lord as he made us. And thus in my folly before this time often I wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not letted.¹ For then thought me that all should have been well.

This stering² was much to be forsaken; and nevertheless mourning and sorrow I made therefore without reason and discretion. But Jesu that in this vision informed me of all that me needed answered by this word and said: "Sin is behovely³ but all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."⁴ In this naked word "Sin," our Lord brought to my mind generally all that is not good, and the shameful despite⁵ and the uttermost tribulation that he bore for us in this life, and his dying and all his pains, and passion⁶ of all his creatures ghostly and bodily. For we be all in part troubled, and we shall be troubled, following our master Jesu, till we be fully purged of our deadly⁷ flesh which be not very good.

And with the beholding of this, with all the pains that ever were or ever shall be, I understood the passion of Christ for the most pain and overpassing.⁸ And with all, this was showed in a touch, readily passed over into comfort. For our good Lord would not that the soul were afeared of this ugly sight. But I saw not sin, for I believe it had no manner of substance, ne no part of being,⁹ ne it might not be known but by the pain that is caused thereof. And this pain is something, as to my sight, for a time, for it purgeth and maketh us to know ourself and ask mercy; for the passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and so is his blessed will. And for the tender love that our good Lord hath to all that shall be saved, he

comforteth readily and sweetly, meaning thus: It is true that sin is cause of all this pain, but all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

These words were showed full tenderly, showing no manner of blame to me ne to none that shall be safe.¹ Then were it great unkindness of me to blame or wonder on God of my sin, sithen² he blameth not me for sin. And in these same words I saw an high marvelous privity³ hid in God, which privity he shall openly make and shall be known to us in heaven. In which knowing we shall verily see the cause why he suffered sin to come, in which sight we shall endlessly have joy.

Endnotes

- Note 8: Hindered.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Pure.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Prevented.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Fretting.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Fitting.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: T. S. Eliot quotes this statement, versions of which appear several times in the *Showings*, in the last movement of his *Four Quartets*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Spite.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Suffering.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Mortal.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Exceeding (pain).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: On "substance" and "being," see chapter 5, p. 224 n. 5.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Saved.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Since.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Secret.[Return to reference 3](#)

Chapters 58, 59, 60, 61

[JESUS AS MOTHER]

From *Chapter 58*

God the blessedful Trinity, which is everlasting being, right as he is endless fro without beginning,⁴ right so it was in his purpose endless to make mankind,⁵ which fair kind⁶ first was dight to⁷ for his own son, the second person; and when he would,⁸ by full accord of all the Trinity he made us all at once.⁹ And in our making he knit us and oned¹ us to himself, by which oneing we be kept as clean² and as noble as we were made. By the virtue of that ilke³ precious oneing we love our maker and like⁴ him, praise and thank him, and endlessly enjoy⁵ in him. And this is the working which is wrought continually in each soul that shall be saved, which is the godly will before said.

And thus in our making God almighty is our kindly⁶ father, and god all wisdom is our kindly mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Ghost, which is all one God, one Lord. And in the knitting and in the oneing he is our very true spouse and we his loved wife⁷ and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased. For he sayeth: "I love thee and thou lovest me, and our love shall never part in two."

I beheld the working of all the blessed Trinity, in which beholding I saw and understood these three properties: The property of the fatherhood, and the property of the motherhood, and the property of the lordship in one God. In our father almighty we have our keeping⁸ and our bliss as anemptis⁹ our kindly substance which is to us by our making fro without beginning.¹ And in the second person in wit² and wisdom we have our keeping as anemptis our sensuality³ our restoring and our saving, for he is our mother, brother and savior. And in our good lord the Holy Ghost we have our rewarding and our yielding⁴ for our living and our travail,⁵ and endlessly overpassing⁶ all that we desire in his marvelous courtesy of his high plenteous grace. For all our life is in three: in the first we have our

being, and in the second we have our increasing, and in the third we have our fulfilling. The first is kind,⁷ the second is mercy, the third is grace.

For the first⁸ I saw and understood that the high might of the Trinity is our father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our lord; and all these have we in kind and in our substantial making. And furthermore I saw that the second person, which is our mother, substantially the same dearworthy person,⁹ is now become our mother sensual,¹ for we be double of God's making, that is to say substantial and sensual. Our substance is the higher part, which we have in our father God almighty; and the second person of the Trinity is our mother in kind in our substantial making, in whom we be grounded and rooted, and he is our mother of mercy in our sensual taking.²

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From *Chapter 59*

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And thus is Jesu our very³ mother in kind of our first making, and he is our very mother in grace by taking of our kind made. All the fair working and all the sweet kindly offices of dearworthy motherhood is impropered to⁴ the second person, for in him we have this goodly will, whole and safe without end, both in kind and in grace, of his own proper goodness.

I understood three manner of beholdings of motherhood in God. The first is ground of our kind making, the second is taking of our kind, and there beginneth the motherhood of grace, the third is motherhood in working.⁵ And therein is a forthspreading⁶ by the same grace of length and breadth, of high and of deepness without end. And all is one love.

Chapter 60

But now me behooveth to say a little more of this forthspreading, as I understood, in the meaning of our Lord: how that we be brought again by the motherhood of mercy and grace into our kindly stead, where that we were in,⁷ made by the motherhood of kind love, which kind love never leaveth us.

Our kind mother, our gracious mother (for he would⁸ all wholly become our mother in all thing) he took the ground of his work full low⁹ and full mildly in the maiden's womb. And that showed he first, where he brought that meek maiden before the eye of my understanding, in the simple stature as she was when she conceived;¹ that is to say our high god, the sovereign wisdom of all, in this low place he arrayed him and dight him² all ready in our poor flesh, himself to do the service, he and the office of motherhood in all thing. The mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest: nearest for it is most of kind, readiest for it is most of love, and sikerest³ for it is most of truth. This office ne might nor could never none doon to the full but he alone. We wit⁴ that all our mothers bear us to pain and to dying. Ah, what is that? But our very Mother Jesu, he alone beareth us to joy and to endless living, blessed moot⁵ he be. Thus he sustaineth us within him in love and travail, into the full time that he would suffer the sharpest thorns and grievous pains that ever were or ever shall be, and died at the last. And when he had done, and so borne us to bliss, yet might not all this make aseeth⁶ to his marvelous love. And that showed he in these high overpassing words of love: "If I might suffer more I would suffer more."⁷ He might no more die, but he would not stint⁸ working.

Wherefore him behooveth to find⁹ us, for the dearworthy love of motherhood hath made him debtor to us.¹ The mother may give her child sucken her milk, but our precious mother Jesu, he may feed us with himself, and doth full courteously and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament, that is precious food of very life; and with all the

sweet sacraments he sustaineth us full mercifully and graciously, and so meant he in these blessed words, where he said: "I it am that holy church preacheth thee and teacheth thee." That is to say: All the health and the life of sacraments, all the virtue and the grace of my word, all the goodness that is ordained in holy church to thee, I it am.

The mother may lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesu, he may homely lead us into his blessed breast by his sweet open side,² and show us therein in party of³ the godhead and the joys of heaven with ghostly sureness of endless bliss. And that showed he in the tenth revelation, giving the same understanding in this sweet word where he sayeth: "Lo, how I love thee." * * *

This fair lovely word "Mother," it is so sweet and so kind in itself that it may not verily be said of none ne to none but of him and to him⁴ that is very mother of life and of all. To the property of motherhood longeth⁵ kind love, wisdom, and knowing, and it is God. For though it be so that our bodily forthbringing be but little, low, and simple in regard⁶ of our ghostly forthbringing, yet it is he that doth it in the creatures by whom that it is done. The kind loving mother that woot⁷ and knoweth the need of her child, she keepeth it full tenderly as the kind and condition of motherhood will. And ever as it waxeth⁸ in age and in stature, she changeth her works but not her love. And when it is waxed of more age, she suffereth it that it be chastised in breaking down of vices to make the child receive virtues and grace. This working with all that be fair and good, our Lord doth it in hem by whom it is done. Thus he is our mother in kind by the working of grace in the lower party for love of the higher. And he will⁹ that we know it, for he will have all our love fastened to him; and in this I saw that all debt that we owe by God's bidding to fatherhood and motherhood is fulfilled in true loving of God, which blessed love Christ worketh in us. And this was showed in all, and namely in the words where he sayeth: "I it am that thou lovest."

Chapter 61

And in our ghostly forthbringing he useth more tenderness in keeping without any comparison, by as much as our soul is of more price in his sight. He kindleth our understanding, he prepareth our ways, he easeth our conscience, he comforteth our soul, he lighteth our heart and giveth us in party knowing and loving in his blessedful godhead, with gracious mind in his sweet manhood and his blessed passion, with courteous marveling in his high overpassing goodness, and maketh us to love all that he loveth for his love, and to be well apaid¹ with him and with all his works. And when we fall, hastily he raiseth us by his lovely becleping² and his gracious touching. And when we be strengthened by his sweet working, then we wilfully³ choose him by his grace to be his servants and his lovers, lastingly without end.

And yet after this he suffereth some of us to fall more hard and more grievously than ever we did before, as us thinketh. And then ween⁴ we (that be not all wise) that all were nought that we have begun. But it is not so, for it needeth us to fall, and it needeth us to see it; for if we fell not, we should not know how feeble and how wretched we be of ourself, nor also we should not so fulsomely⁵ know the marvelous love of our maker.

For we shall verily see in heaven without end that we have grievously sinned in this life; and notwithstanding this we shall verily see that we were never hurt in his love, nor we were never the less of price in his sight. And by the assay of this falling we shall have an high and a marvelous knowing of love in God without an end. For hard and marvelous is that love which may not nor will not be broken for⁶ trespass.

And this was one understanding of profit; and other⁷ is the lowness and meekness that we shall get by the sight of our falling, for thereby we shall highly be raised in heaven, to which rising we might never have come without that meekness. And therefore it

needed us to see it; and if we see it not, though we fell it should not profit us. And commonly first we fall and sithen⁸ we see it; and both is of the mercy of God.

The mother may suffer the child to fall sometime and be diseased⁹ in diverse manner, of peril come to her child for love. And though our earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our heavenly mother Jesu may never suffer us that be his children to perish, for he is all mighty, all wisdom, and all love, and so is none but he, blessed mote he be.

But oft times when our falling and our wretchedness is showed to us, we be so sore adread and so greatly ashamed of ourself that unnethes¹ we wit where that we may hold us. But then will not our courteous mother that we flee away, for him were nothing loather;² for then he will that we use³ the condition of a child. For when it is diseased and afeared, it runneth hastily to the mother; and if it may do no more, it crieth on the mother for help with all the might. So will he that we do as the meek child, saying thus: "My kind mother, my gracious mother, my dearworthy mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself foul and unlike to thee, and I may not nor can amend it but with thine help and grace."

And if we feel us not then eased, as soon be we sure that he useth⁴ the condition of a wise mother. For if he see that it be for profit to us to mourn and to weep, he suffereth with ruth⁵ and pity, into the best time,⁶ for love. And he will then that we use the property of a child that ever more kindly trusteth to the love of the mother in weal and in woe. And he will that we take us mightily to the faith of holy church and find there our dearworthy mother in solace and true understanding with all the blessed common.⁷ For one singular person may oftentimes be broken, as it seemeth to the self, but the whole body of holy church was never broken, nor never shall be without end. And therefore a sure thing it is, a good and a gracious, to willen meekly and mightily been fastened and oned to our mother holy church, that is Christ Jesu. For the flood of his mercy that is his dearworthy blood and precious water is plenteous

to make us fair and clean. The blessed wounds of our savior be open and enjoy⁸ to heal us. The sweet gracious hands of our mother be ready and diligent about us; for he in all this working useth the very office of a kind nurse that hath not else to do but to entend⁹ the salvation of her child.

It is his office to save us, it is his worship to do it, and it is his will we know it; for he will we love him sweetly and trust in him meekly and mightily. And this showed he in these gracious words: "I keep thee full surely."

Endnotes

- Note 4: That is, eternal.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, his purpose to make humankind is also eternal.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Nature.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Prepared for.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Wanted to.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: All of us at one and the same time.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: United. Julian sustains the idea of oneness in the verb *oned* and the noun *oneing*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Pure.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Same.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Please.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Rejoice.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Both "kind" and "natural."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The relationship between God and humanity is also conceived as a mystical marriage in which Christ is the bridegroom and the human soul his spouse.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Protection.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: With regard to.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, our natural created being, which is eternal.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Intelligence.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: With regard to the nature of our sensual being (as opposed to substance).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Payment.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Life and labor.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Surpassing.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Nature.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: For the first time.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The same beloved person with regard to our eternal being.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Mother of our physical being.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Taking on of sensuality.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: True.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Appropriated to.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: At work.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: (Infinite) spreading out, expansion.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The natural condition, that is, the state of grace, that we were in originally.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Because he wanted to.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, he laid the groundwork for his mission in a very humble place.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The appearance of the Virgin in Julian's first vision. See chapter 4, p. 223.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Arrayed and dressed himself.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Surest.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Know.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: May.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Bring satisfaction.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, If I could suffer more, I would [wish to] suffer more. These and other quotations refer to Julian's earlier revelations.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Stop.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Nourish, feed.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: As any mother is obligated to look after her child.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The wound inflicted by a soldier in John 19:34.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A part of.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Other manuscripts read “her,” with reference to the Virgin.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Belongs.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In comparison with.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Is aware of.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Grows.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Wants.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Pleased.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Calling (to us).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Gladly.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Suppose.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Fully.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Because of.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Another.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Then.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Unhappy.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Scarcely.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Nothing would be more hateful to him.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: He wants us to experience.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Right away we are sure he is practicing.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Compassion.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Until the right time.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Community.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Rejoice.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Be busy about.[Return to reference 9](#)

Chapter 86

[CHRIST'S MEANING]

This book is begun by God's gift and his grace, but it is not yet performed,¹ as to my sight. For charity, pray we all together with God's working, thanking, trusting, enjoying, for thus will our good Lord be prayed, but the understanding that I took in all his own meaning, and in the sweet words where he sayeth full merrily: "I am ground of thy beseeching." For truly I saw and understood in our Lord's meaning that he showed it for he will have it known more than it is. In which knowing he will give us grace to love him and cleave to him, for he beheld his heavenly treasure with so great love on earth that he will give us more light, and solace in heavenly joy, in drawing of our hearts fro sorrow and darkness which we are in.

And fro the time that it was showed, I desired oftentimes to wit² in what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen year after and more, I was answered in ghostly understanding, saying thus: "What, wouldst thou wit thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Wit it well, love was his meaning. Who showeth it thee? Love. What showed he thee? Love. Wherefore showeth he it thee? For love. Hold thee therein, thou shalt wit more in the same. But thou shalt never wit therein other withouten end."

Thus was I learned,³ that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw full surely in this and in all, that ere God made us he loved us, which love was never slaked⁴ ne never shall. And in this love he hath done all his works, and in this love he hath made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our making we had beginning, but the love wherein he made us was in him fro without beginning. In which love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God withouten end.

*Deo gracias. Explicit liber revelacionum Julyane anacorite
Norwyche, cuius anime propicietur deus.*⁵

ca. 1390

Endnotes

- Note 1: Completed.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Know.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Taught.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Abated.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Thanks be to God. Here ends the book of revelations of Julian, anchorite of Norwich, on whose soul may God have mercy (Latin).[Return to reference 5](#)

MARGERY KEMPE

ca. 1373—ca. 1438

The Book of Margery Kempe is the spiritual autobiography of a medieval laywoman, recounting her divine visions and her struggles to live the holy life that Christ himself has instructed her to lead. The claim to such sanctity by a married woman, the mother of fourteen children, was in itself sufficient grounds for controversy. In addition, Kempe's outspoken defense of her visions as well as her highly emotional style of religious expression set her at odds with fellow worshippers and pilgrims and with church authorities, although she also won both lay and clerical supporters.

Margery Kempe was the daughter of John Burnham, five-time mayor of King's Lynn, a thriving commercial town in Norfolk. At about the age of twenty she married John Kempe, a well-to-do fellow townsman. After the traumatic delivery of her first child—the rate of maternal mortality in childbirth was high—she sought to confess to a priest. His harsh, censorious response precipitated a mental breakdown, from which she eventually recovered through the first of her spiritual visions. Her subsequent conversion and strict religious observances generated a good deal of domestic strife, but she continued to share her husband's bed until, around the age of forty, she negotiated a vow of celibacy with him, which was confirmed before the bishop and left her free to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There she experienced visions of Christ's passion and of the sufferings of the Virgin Mary. These visions

recurred during the rest of her life, and her noisy weeping at such times made her the object of much scorn and hostility. Her orthodoxy was several times examined, but her unquestioning acceptance of the Church's doctrines and authority, and perhaps also her status as a former mayor's daughter, shielded her against charges of heresy.

Kempe reports that she was unable to read or write and acquired her command of the Bible from sermons and other oral sources. Late in her life, she dictated her story in two parts to two different scribes; the latter of these was a priest who revised the whole text. Even if she did not inscribe the words herself, it seems likely that the *Book* retains much of the characteristic style and perspective of its dictating source. The text is narrated in the third person (rather than the first, as most autobiographies are).

Kempe's *Book* offers a perspective on the tradition of "affective piety"—a tradition described in the introduction to this section ([pp. 215–16](#))—unlike any other. Here that visionary tradition comes to life in the context of vividly realized, often painful psychological and bodily experience. Kempe's own marriage and her often troubled social relationships inform and are informed by her "homely" (domestic, intimate) and sometimes erotic spiritual connections. Just as she sees Christ present in male babies or good-looking young men, so she sees the living divine presence in the Eucharistic host (the bread consecrated during the mass). "Sir," she says to a skeptic, "His death is as fresh to me as He had died this same day." Such intensely sympathetic contemplation has an ugly flip side, however. As in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, where tender feeling for the Blessed Virgin is complemented by hatred for the "cursed Jewes," Margery's pathos in meditating on Christ's suffering is accompanied by hostility toward the Jewish people, whom she imagines as the cause of Jesus's pain (Book 1.79).

From The Book of Margery Kempe^{[1](#)}

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is based on the unique manuscript, first discovered in 1934, edited by Lynn Staley. Spelling and inflexional forms have in many cases been modernized. Some archaic words have also been silently translated.[Return to reference 1](#)

[THE BIRTH OF HER FIRST CHILD AND HER FIRST VISION]

[Book 1.1] When this creature² was twenty years of age or somewhat more, she was married to a worshipful³ burgess and was with child within a short time, as nature would. And, after she had conceived, she was labored with great attacks of illness until the child was born, and then, what for the labor she had in childing and for the sickness going before, she despaired of her life, thinking she might not live. And then she sent for her ghostly father,⁴ for she had a thing in conscience which she had never shown before that time in all her life. For she was ever hindered by her enemy, the devil, evermore saying to her that, while she was in good health, she needed no confession but could do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enough. And therefore this creature oftentimes did great penance in fasting on bread and water and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, except she would not show this sin in confession. And, when she was at any time sick or troubled, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned, for she was not shriven⁵ of that sin. Wherefore, after her child was born, she, not trusting her life, sent for her ghostly father, as was said before, in full will to be shrive of all her lifetime as nearly as she could. And, when she came to the point to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her before she had fully said her intent, and so she would no more say for aught he might do.

And anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderfully vexed and labored with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some odd days. And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths, all inflamed with burning flames of fire as if they should have swallowed her in, sometimes menacing her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and hailing her both night and day during the foresaid time. And also the devils cried upon her with great threats and bade her that she

should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, his mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self; she spoke many a reproving word and many a harsh word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; just as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have killed herself many a time because of her stirrings and have been damned with them in hell. And as a witness thereof she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life afterward. And also she tore the skin on her body against her heart grievously with her nails, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have done, save she was bound and kept with strength both day and night so that she might not have her will.

And, when she had long been labored in these and many other temptations, so that men thought she should never have escaped nor lived, then on a time, as she lay alone and her keepers were away from her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, ever to be trusted, worshiped be his name, never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature, who had forsaken him, in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beautiful, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, said to her these words: "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I forsook never you?"

And anon, as soon as he had said these words, she saw verily how the air opened as bright as any lightning, and he rose up into the air, not right hastily and quickly, but fairly and easily so that she might well behold him in the air until it was closed again. And anon the creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as well as ever she was before, and prayed her husband, as soon as he came to her, that she might have the keys of the buttery⁶ in order to take her meat and drink as she had done before.

Endnotes

- Note 2: Throughout the book Kempe refers to herself in the third person as “this creature,” a standard way of saying “this person, a being created by God.”[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Worthy.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Spiritual father; that is, a priest.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Confessed and then absolved.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Pantry.[Return to reference 6](#)

[MARGERY AND HER HUSBAND REACH A SETTLEMENT]

* * *

[Book 1.11] It befell upon a Friday on Midsummer Eve in right hot weather, as this creature was coming from York bearing a bottle with beer in her hand and her husband a loaf in his bosom, he asked his wife this question, "Margery, if there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless I should common naturally with you as I have done before, tell me the truth from your conscience—for you say you will not lie—whether would you suffer my head to be smote off or else suffer me to meddle with you again, as I did at one time?"

"Alas, sir," she said, "why move you this matter, and have we been chaste these eight weeks?"

"For I will know the truth of your heart."

And then she said with great sorrow, "Forsooth I had rather see you be slain than we should turn again to our uncleanness."

And he said in reply, "You are no good wife."

And then she asked her husband what was the cause that he had not meddled with her eight weeks before, since she lay with him every night in his bed. And he said he was so made afraid when he would have touched her that he dared do no more.

"Now, good sir, amend yourself and ask God mercy, for I told you nearly three years since that you should be slain suddenly, and now is this the third year, and yet I hope I shall have my desire. Good sir, I pray you grant me what I shall ask, and I shall pray for you that you shall be saved through the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall have more reward in heaven than if you wore a hair cloth or a jacket of mail. I pray you, suffer me to make a vow of chastity in whatever bishop's hand that God will."

"No," he said, "that will I not grant you, for now may I use you without deadly sin and then might I not so."

Then she said again, "If it be the will of the Holy Ghost to fulfill what I have said, I pray God you may consent thereto; and, if it be not the will of the Holy Ghost, I pray God you never consent thereto."

Then went they forth toward Bridlington in right hot weather, the aforesaid creature having great sorrow and great dread for her chastity. And, as they came by a cross, her husband set himself down under the cross, calling his wife unto him and saying these words unto her, "Margery, grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire. My first desire is that we shall lie still together in one bed as we have done before; the second, that you shall pay my debts before you go to Jerusalem; and the third, that you shall eat and drink with me on Fridays as you were wont to do."⁷

"No, sir," she said, "to break the Friday I will never grant you while I live."

"Well," he said, "then shall I meddle you again."

She prayed him that he would give her leave to make her prayers, and he granted it well. Then she kneeled down beside a cross in the field and prayed in this manner with great abundance of tears, "Lord God, you know all things; you know what sorrow I have had to be chaste in my body to you all these three years, and now might I have my wish, and I dare not for love of you. For, if I would break that manner of fasting which you commanded me, to keep the Friday without food or drink, I should now have my desire. But, blessed Lord, you know I will not go against your will, and great now is my sorrow unless I find comfort in you. Now, blessed Jesus, make your will known to me, unworthy, so that I may follow thereafter and fulfill it with all my might."

And then our Lord Jesus Christ with great sweetness spoke to this creature, commanding her to go again to her husband and pray him to grant her what she desired. "And he shall have what he desires. For, my worthy daughter, this was the cause that I bade you to fast, for you should the sooner obtain and get your desire, and

now it is granted you. I wish no longer for you to fast, therefore I bid you in the name of Jesus eat and drink as your husband does.”

Then this creature thanked our Lord Jesus Christ for his grace and his goodness, then rose up and went to her husband, saying unto him, “Sir, if it pleases you, you shall grant me my desire, and you shall have your desire. Grant me that you shall not come in my bed, and I grant you to requite your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God so that you never challenge me by asking the debt of matrimony after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink on the Friday at your bidding.”

Then said her husband again to her, “As free may your body be to God as it has been to me.”

This creature thanked God greatly, rejoicing that she had her desire, praying her husband that they should say three Our Father’s in the worship of the Trinity for the great grace that he had granted them. And so they did, kneeling under a cross, and afterward they ate and drank together in great gladness of spirit. This was on a Friday on Midsummer Eve.

* * *

Endnotes

- Note 7: Christ had told her that keeping a strict Friday fast would allow her to have her wish to end further sexual relations with her husband. [Return to reference 7](#)

[MARGERY SEES THE HOST⁸ FLUTTER AT MASS]

* * *

[**Book 1.20**] One day as this creature was hearing her Mass, a young man and a good priest holding up the sacrament⁹ in his hands over his head, the sacrament shook and flickered to and fro as a dove flickers with her wings. And, when he held up the chalice with the precious sacrament, the chalice moved to and fro as though it should have fallen out of his hands. When the consecration was done, this creature had great marvel about the stirring and moving of the blessed sacrament, desiring to see more consecrations, looking if it would do so again. Then said our Lord Jesus Christ to the creature, "You shall no more see it in this manner, therefore thank God that you have seen. My daughter Bridget¹ saw me never in this manner."

Then said this creature in her thought, "Lord, what does this betoken?"

"It betokens vengeance."

"A, good Lord, what vengeance?"

Then said our Lord in reply to her, "There shall be an earthquake; tell it to whom you wish in the name of Jesus. For I tell you forsooth, right as I spoke to Saint Bridget, right so I speak to you, daughter, and I tell you truly it is true, every word that is written in Bridget's book, and by you it shall be known for very truth. And you shall fare well, daughter, in spite of all your enemies. The more envy they have for you because of my grace, the better shall I love you. I were not a rightful God unless I proved² you, for I know you better than you know yourself, whatever men say of you. You say I have great patience for the sin of the people, and you say the truth, but, if you saw the sin of the people as I do, you would have much more

marvel in my patience and much more sorrow in the sin of the people than you have.”

Then the creature said, “Alas, worthy Lord, what shall I do for the people?”

Our Lord answered, “It is enough for you to do as you do.”

Then she prayed, “Merciful Lord Christ Jesus, in you is all mercy and grace and goodness. Have mercy, pity, and compassion for them. Show your mercy and your goodness upon them. Help them; send them very contrition, and let them never die in their sin.”

Our merciful Lord said, “I may no more, daughter, for my rightfulness, do for them than I do. I send them preaching and teaching, pestilence and battles, hunger and famine, loss of their goods with great sickness, and many other tribulations, and they will not believe my words, nor will they know my visitation. And therefore I shall say to them that I made my servants to pray for you, and you despised their works and their living.”

* * *

Endnotes

- Note 8: The Eucharistic wafer consumed in the sacrament of Communion.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A metonymy for the Eucharistic wafer, strictly one of the seven sacraments.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Saint Bridget of Sweden (ca. 1303–1373), to whose *Revelations* Margery refers in Book 1.17 and 1.58.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Tested.[Return to reference 2](#)

[PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM]

* * *

[Book 1.28] And so they³ went forth into the Holy Land till they might see Jerusalem. And, when this creature saw Jerusalem, riding on an ass, she thanked God with all her heart, praying him for his mercy that, as he had brought her to see this earthly city Jerusalem, he would grant her grace to see the blissful city Jerusalem above, the city of heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ, answering to her thought, granted her to have her desire. Then, for joy that she had and the sweetness that she felt in the dalliance of our Lord, she was in point to have fallen off her ass, for she might not bear the sweetness and grace that God wrought in her soul. Then two German pilgrims went to her and kept her from falling, of which one was a priest. And he put spices in her mouth to comfort her, thinking she had been sick. And so they helped her forth to Jerusalem.

And, when she came there, she said, "Sirs, I pray you be not displeased though I weep sorely in this holy place where our Lord Jesus Christ was quick⁴ and dead."

Then went they to the Temple⁵ in Jerusalem, and they were let in on the one day at evensong time and abided therein till the next day at evensong time.

Then the friars lifted up a cross and led the pilgrims about from one place to another where our Lord had suffered his pains and his passions, every man and woman bearing a wax candle in their hand. And the friars always, as they went about, told them what our Lord suffered in every place. And the foresaid creature wept and sobbed so plenteously as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eye suffering his Passion at that time. Before her in her soul she saw him verily by contemplation, and that caused her to have compassion. And when they came up onto the Mount of Calvary, she fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as

though her heart should have burst asunder, for in the city of her soul she saw verily and freshly how our Lord was crucified. Before her face she heard and saw in her ghostly sight the mourning of our Lady, of Saint John and Mary Magdalene,⁶ and of many others who loved our Lord. And she had so great compassion and so great pain to see our Lord's pain that she might not keep herself from crying and roaring though she should have died from it.

And this was the first cry that ever she cried in any contemplation. And this manner of crying endured many years after this time for aught that any man might do, and therefore suffered she much despite and much reproof. The crying was so loud and so wonderful that it made the people astonished unless they had heard it before or else they knew the cause of the crying. And she had them so often that they made her right⁷ weak in her bodily mights, and, namely, if she heard of our Lord's Passion. And sometimes, when she saw the crucifix, or if she saw a man or a beast, whether⁸ it were, had a wound or if a man beat a child before her or smote a horse or another beast with a whip, if she might see it or hear it, she thought she saw our Lord being beaten or wounded just as she saw in the man or in the beast, as well in the field as in the town, and by herself alone, as well as among the people.

First when she had her cryings at Jerusalem, she had them often times, and in Rome also. And, when she came home into England, first at her coming home it came but seldom, as it were once in a month, afterward once in the week, afterward daily, and once she had fourteen on one day, and another day she had seven, and so as God would visit her, sometime in the church, sometime in the street, sometime in the chamber, sometime in the field when God would send them, for she knew never time nor hour when they should come. And they came never without passing great sweetness of devotion and high contemplation.

And, as soon as she perceived that she should cry, she would keep it in as much as she might, so that the people should not have heard it, for it annoyed them. For some said it was a wicked spirit vexed her; some said it was a sickness; some said she had drunk too

much wine; some banned her; some wished she had been in the harbor; some would she had been in the sea in a bottomless boat; and so each man as he thought. Other ghostly men loved her and favored her the more. Some great clerks said our Lady cried never so, nor no saint in heaven, but they knew full little what she felt, nor would they not believe that she might have abstained from crying if she wished.

* * *

Endnotes

- Note 3: The company of pilgrims.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Living.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, site of Christ's crucifixion, death, and burial.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Mary, St. John, and Mary Magdalene are traditionally portrayed at the foot of the Cross in medieval art. See John 19:25.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Especially.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Whichever.[Return to reference 8](#)

[MARGERY'S MARRIAGE TO AND INTIMACY WITH CHRIST]

* * *

[Book 1.35] As this creature was in the Apostle's Church at Rome on St. John Lateran's Day,⁹ the Father of Heaven said to her, "Daughter, I am well pleased with you, inasmuch as you believe in all the sacraments of Holy Church and in all faith that pertains to it, and specially because you believe in the manhood of my son and because of the great compassion that you have for his bitter Passion."

Also the Father said to this creature, "Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, for I shall show you my secrets and my counsels,¹ for you shall dwell with me without end."

Then the creature kept silence in her soul and answered not thereto, for she was full sore afraid of the Godhead, and she had no knowledge of the dalliance of the Godhead, for all her love and all her affection was set on the manhood of Christ and thereof had she good knowledge, and she would for no thing have parted therefrom. She was so much affected by the manhood of Christ that when she saw women in Rome bearing children in their arms, if she might learn that there were any men children, she should then cry, roar, and weep as though she had seen Christ in his childhood. And, if she might have had her will, oftentimes she would have taken the children out from the mother's arms and have kissed them in the place of Christ. And, if she saw a handsome man, she had great pain to look on him in case she might have seen him who was both God and man. And therefore she cried many times and often when she met a seemly man and wept and sobbed full sorely in the manhood of Christ as she went in the streets at Rome, so that those who saw her wondered full much on her, for they knew not the cause.

And therefore it was no wonder if she were silent and answered not the Father of Heaven when he told her that she should be wedded to his God-head. Then said the second person, Christ Jesus, whose manhood she loved so much, to her, "What say you, Margery, daughter, to my Father of these words that he speaks to you? Are you well pleased that it is so?"

And then she would not answer the second person but wept wonder sore, desiring to have still himself and in no way to be parted from him.

Then the second person in the Trinity answered to his Father for her and said, "Father, have her excused, for she is yet but young and not fully instructed as to how she should answer."

And then the Father took her by the hand in her soul before the Son and the Holy Ghost and the Mother of Jesus and all the twelve apostles and Saint Katherine and Saint Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins, with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul, "I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, as long as you be buxom² and obedient to do what I bid you do. For, daughter, there was never a child so buxom to the mother as I shall be to you, both in well and in woe, to help you and comfort you. And thereto I make you surety."

And then the Mother of God and all the saints that were there present in her soul prayed that they might have much joy together. And then the creature with high devotion, with great plenty of tears, thanked God for this ghostly³ comfort, considering herself in her own feeling right unworthy of any such grace as she felt, for she felt many great comforts, both ghostly comforts and bodily comforts. Sometimes she felt sweet smells with her nose; it was sweeter, she thought, than ever was any sweet earthly thing that she smelled before, nor might she ever tell how sweet it was, for she thought she might have lived thereby if they would have lasted.

Sometimes she heard with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she might not well hear what a man said to her in that time unless he spoke the louder. These sounds and melodies had she heard nearly every day for the term of twenty-five years when

this book was written, and especially when she was in devout prayer, also many times while she was at Rome and in England both.

She saw with her bodily eye many white things flying all about her on every side, as thick in a manner as motes⁴ in the sun; they were right delicate and comfortable, and the brighter that the sun shone, the better she might see them. She saw them many different times and in many different places, both in church and in her chamber, at her meal and in her prayers, in field and in town, both going and sitting. And many times she was afraid what they might be, for she saw them as well in nights in darkness as in daylight. Then, when she was afraid of them, our Lord said unto her, "By this token, daughter, believe it is God that speaks in you, for whereso God is, heaven is, and where God is there are many angels, and God is in you and you are in him. And therefore be not afraid, daughter, for this betokens that you have many angels about you to keep you both day and night so that no devil shall have power over you nor no evil man harm you."

Then from that time forward she used to say when she saw them come, "*Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini.*"⁵

Also our Lord gave her another token, which endured about sixteen years, and it increased ever more and more, and that was a flame of fire wonderfully hot and delectable and right comfortable, not wasting but ever increasing of flame, for, though the weather was never so cold, she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart, as verily as a man should feel the material fire if he put his hand or his finger therein.

When she felt first the fire of love burning in her breast, she was afraid thereof, and then our Lord answered to her mind and said, "Daughter, be not afraid, for this heat is the heat of the Holy Ghost, which shall burn away all your sins, for the fire of love quenches all sins. And you shall understand by this token that the Holy Ghost is in you, and you know well wherever the Holy Ghost is, there is the Father, and where the Father is, there is the Son, and so you have fully in your soul all the Holy Trinity. Therefore you have great cause to love me right well, and yet you shall have greater cause than ever

you had to love me, for you shall hear what you never heard, and you shall see what you never saw, and you shall feel what you never felt.

“For, daughter, you are sure of the love of God as God is God. Your soul is more sure of the love of God than of your own body, for your soul shall part from your body, but God shall never part from your soul, for they are joined together without end. Therefore, daughter, you have as great cause to be merry as any lady in this world, and, if you knew, daughter, how much you please me when you suffer me willfully to speak in you, you should never do otherwise, for this is a holy life, and the time is right well spent. For, daughter, this life pleases me more than wearing of the jacket of mail or of the hair shirt or fasting on bread and water, for, if you said every day a thousand Pater Nosters⁶ you should not please me as well as you do when you are in silence and suffer me to speak in your soul.

[Book 1.36] “Fasting, daughter, is good for young beginners and discreet penance, especially that which their ghostly father gives them or enjoins them to do. And to bid many beads,⁷ it is good to those who can do no better, and yet it is not perfect. But it is a good way toward perfection. For I tell you, daughter, those who are great fasters and great doers of penance, they desire that it should be considered the best life; also those who give themselves to say many devotions, they would have that the best life, and those who give many alms, they would that that was held the best life. And I have oftentimes, daughter, told you that thinking, weeping, and high contemplation is the best life on earth. And you shall have more merit in heaven for one year of thinking in your mind than for a hundred years of praying with your mouth, and yet you will not believe me, for you will bid many beads whether I will or not.

“And yet, daughter, I will not be displeased with you whatever you think, say, or speak, for I am always pleased with you. And, if I were on earth as bodily as I was before I died on the cross, I should not be ashamed of you as many other men are, for I should take

you by the hand among the people and make you great welcome so that they should well know that I loved you right well. For it is suitable for the wife to be homely with her husband. Be he never so great a lord and she so poor a woman when he wedded her, yet they must lie together and rest together in joy and peace. Right so must it be between you and me, for I take no heed what you have been but what you wish to be. And oftentimes have I told you that I have clean forgiven you all your sins. Therefore must I needs be homely with you and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you desire greatly to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in your bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your most worthy darling, and as your sweet son, for I will be loved as a son should be loved by the mother and will that you love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. And therefore you may boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you will.

"And, as often as you think on me or would do any good deed to me, you shall have the same reward in heaven as if you did it to my own precious body which is in heaven, for I ask no more of you but your heart to love what loves you, for my love is ever ready for you."

Then she gave thanks and praise to our Lord Jesus Christ for the high grace and mercy that he showed unto her, an unworthy wretch.

This creature had divers tokens in her bodily hearing. One was a manner of sound as if it had been a pair of bellows blowing in her ear. She, being confounded thereof, was warned in her soul no fear to have, for it was the sound of the Holy Ghost. And then our Lord turned that sound into the voice of a dove, and afterward he turned it into the voice of a little bird which is called a red breast that sang full merrily oftentimes in her right ear. And then should she evermore have great grace after she heard such a token. And she had been used to such tokens about twenty-five years at the writing of this book.

Then our Lord Jesus Christ said to his creature, "By these tokens may you well know that I love you, for you are to me a very mother, and to all the world, because of that great charity that is in you, and

yet I myself am the cause of that charity, and you shall have great reward therefore in Heaven.”

Endnotes

- Note 9: November 9. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Private deliberations. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Submissive. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Spiritual. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Specks of dust. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Latin; Matthew 21:9). A blessing used in the mass as part of the consecration. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: “Our Fathers” (Latin), that is, the Lord’s Prayer. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Prayers (the original sense of the word “bedes,” applied by association to beads in a rosary). [Return to reference 7](#)

[MARGERY'S REACTION TO A PIETÀ⁸]

* * *

[**Book 1.60**] The good priest, of whom it is written before, who was her reader,⁹ fell into great sickness, and she was stirred in her soul to take care of him in God's service. And, when she lacked such as was needful for him, she went about to good men and good women and got such thing as was necessary unto him. He was so sick that men trusted nothing for his life, and his sickness was long continuing. Then on a time, as she was in the church hearing her mass and prayed for the same priest, our Lord said to her that he should live and fare right well. Then was she stirred to go to Norwich to Saint Stephen's Church where is buried the good vicar,¹ who died but little before that time, for whom God showed high mercy to his people, and thank him for the recovery of his priest.

She took leave of her confessor, going forth to Norwich. When she came in the churchyard of Saint Stephen's, she cried, she roared, she wept, she fell down to the ground, so fervently the fire of love burnt in her heart. Afterward she rose up again and went forth weeping into the church to the high altar, and there she fell down with violent sobbing, weepings, and loud cries beside the grave of the good vicar, all ravished with spiritual comfort in the goodness of our Lord who wrought so great grace for his servant who had been her confessor and many times heard her confession of all her living,² and administered to her the precious sacrament of the altar at divers times. And in so much was her devotion the more increased in that she saw our Lord work such special grace for such a creature as she had been conversant with in his lifetime. She had such holy thoughts and such holy visions that she might not control her weeping nor her crying. And therefore the people had great marvel of her, supposing that she had wept for some fleshly or

earthly affection, and said unto her, "What ails you, woman? Why do you fare thus with yourself? We knew him as well as you."

Then were there priests in the same place who knew her manner of working, and they full charitably led her to a tavern and made her drink and made her full high and goodly comfort. Also there was a lady who desired to have the said creature to a meal. And therefore, as good manners required, she went to the church where the lady heard her service, where this creature saw a fair image of our Lady called a *pity*. And through the beholding of that *pity*, her mind was all wholly occupied in the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the compassion of our Lady, Saint Mary, by which she was compelled to cry full loudly and weep full sorely, as though she should have died.

Then came to her the lady's priest, saying, "Damsel, Jesus is dead long since."

When her crying was ceased, she said to the priest, "Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so I think it ought to be to you and to all Christian people. We ought ever to have mind of his kindness and ever think of the doleful death that he died for us."

Then the good lady, hearing her communication, said, "Sir, it is a good example to me, and to other men also, the grace that God works in her soul."

And so the good lady was her advocate and answered for her. Afterward she had her home with her to meat³ and showed her full glad and goodly comfort as long as she would abide there. And soon after, she came home again to Lynn, and the foresaid priest, for whom she went most specially to Norwich, who had read to her for about seven years, recovered and went about where he wished, thanked be almighty God for his goodness.

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Endnotes

- Note 8: An image, painted or sculpted, of the dead Christ laid across the Virgin's lap.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Book 1.58 relates how a priest newly arrived in King's Lynn read to Margery across seven or eight years, from the Bible and from visionary texts.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Richard of Caister (d. 1429), who had a reputation for sanctity.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Of (sins committed in) her entire life.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Dinner.[Return to reference 3](#)

[MARGERY NURSES HER HUSBAND IN HIS OLD AGE]

* * *

[**Book 1.76**] It happened on a time that the husband of the said creature, a man of great age passing three score years,⁴ as he would have come down from his chamber barefoot and bare-leg, he slithered or else failed of his footing and fell down to the ground from the steps, with his head under him grievously broken and bruised, insomuch that he had in his head five rolls of soft material in the wounds for many days while his head was healing. And, as God would, it was known to some of his neighbors how he had fallen down the steps, perhaps through the din and the rushing of his falling. And so they came to him and found him lying with his head under him, half on life, all streaked with blood, never likely to have spoken with priest nor with clerk unless by high grace and miracle.⁵ Then the said creature, his wife, was sent for, and so she came to him. Then was he taken up and his head was sewn, and he was sick a long time after, so that men thought that he should have been dead. And then the people said, if he died, his wife was worthy to be hanged for his death, forasmuch as she might have kept him and did not.

They dwelled not together; they lay not together, for, as is written before, they both with one assent and with free will of the other had made a vow to live chaste. And therefore to avoid all perils they dwelled and so journeyed in divers places where no suspicion should be had of their incontinence, for first they dwelled together after they had made their vow, and then the people slandered them and said they used their lust and their liking as they did before their vow-making. And, when they went out on pilgrimage or to see and speak with other ghostly creatures, many evil folk whose tongues were their own, lacking the dread and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, thought and said that they went rather to woods,

groves, or valleys to use the lust of their bodies so that the people should not espy it nor know it. They, having knowledge how prone the people were to think evil of them, desiring to avoid all occasion, inasmuch as they might goodly, by their good will and their mutual consent, they parted asunder as touching their board and their chambers, and went to board in divers places. And this was the cause that she was not with him and also that she should not be hindered from her contemplation.

And therefore, when he had fallen and grievously was hurt, as is said before, the people said, if he died, it was worthy that she answer for his death. Then she prayed to our Lord that her husband might live a year and she delivered from slander if it were his pleasure. Our Lord said to her mind, "Daughter, you shall have your boon, for he shall live, and I have wrought a great miracle for you that he was not dead. And I bid you take him home and keep him for my love."

She said, "No, good Lord, for I shall then not tend to you as I do now."

"Yes, daughter," said our Lord, "you shall have as much reward for keeping him and helping him in his need at home as if you were in church to make your prayers. And you have said many times that you would fain keep me. I pray you now keep him for the love of me, for he has sometime fulfilled your will and my will both, and he has made your body free to me so that you should serve me and live chaste and clean, and therefore I will that you be free to help him at his need in my name."

"A, Lord," said she, "for your mercy grant me grace to obey your will and fulfill your will and let never my ghostly enemies have any power to hinder me from fulfilling your will."

Then she took home her husband with her and kept him years after, as long as he lived, and had full much labor with him, for in his last days he turned childish again and lacked reason so that he could not do his own easement by going to a stool, or else he would not, but, as a child, voided his natural digestion in his linen clothes where he sat by the fire or at the table, wherever it might be, he would

spare no place. And therefore was her labor much the more in washing and wringing and her expense in making fires and hindered her full much from her contemplation, so that many times she should have been irked at her labor save she bethought herself of how she in her young age had full many delectable thoughts, fleshly lusts, and inordinate loves for his body. And therefore she was glad to be punished with the same person and took it much the more easily and served him and helped him, as she thought, as she would have done Christ himself.

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Endnotes

- Note 4: Sixty years.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, unlikely to have confessed to a priest and received rites except by grace.[Return to reference 5](#)

[MARGERY'S VISION OF THE PASSION SEQUENCE⁶]

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[Book 1.79] Then she beheld in the sight of her soul our blissful Lord Christ Jesus coming toward his Passion, and, before he went, he kneeled down and took his mother's blessing. Then she saw his mother falling down in swooning before her son, saying unto him, "Alas, my dear Son, how shall I suffer this sorrow and have no joy in all this world but you alone. A, dear Son, if you will die anyway, let me die before you and let me never suffer this day of sorrow, for I may never bear this sorrow that I shall have for your death. I would, Son, that I might suffer death for you so that you should not die, if man's soul might so be saved. Now, dear son, if you have no pity on yourself, have pity on your mother, for you know full well there can no man in all this world comfort me but you alone."

Then our Lord took up his mother in his arms and kissed her full sweetly and said to her, "A, blessed mother, be of a good cheer and of a good comfort, for I have told you full often that I must needs suffer death, otherwise no man should be saved nor ever come into bliss. And mother, it is my father's will that it be so, and therefore I pray you let it be your will also, for my death shall bring me great honor and you and all mankind great joy and profit, for whoever trusts in my passion and works thereafter. And therefore, blessed mother, you must abide here after me, for in you shall rest all the faith of Holy Church, and by your faith Holy Church shall increase in her faith. And therefore I pray you, worthy mother, cease from your sorrowing, for I shall not leave you comfortless. I shall leave here with you John, my cousin, to comfort you instead of me; I shall send my holy angels to comfort you on earth; and I shall comfort you in your soul my own self, for, mother, you know well I have promised you the bliss of heaven and that you are sure thereof. A, worthy

mother, what would you better than where I am king you be queen, and all angels and saints shall be obedient to your will?

"And what grace you ask me I shall not deny your desire. I shall give you power over the devils so that they shall be afraid of you and you not of them. And also, my blessed mother, I have said to you beforetime that I shall come for you my own self when you shall pass out of this world with all my angels and all my saints that are in heaven and bring you before my father with all manner of music, melody, and joy. And there shall I set you in great peace and rest without end. And there shall you be crowned as Queen of Heaven, as lady of all the world, and as Empress of Hell. And therefore, my worthy mother, I pray you bless me and let me go do my father's will, for therefore I came into this world and took flesh and blood from you."

When the said creature beheld this glorious sight in her soul and saw how he blessed his mother and his mother him, and then his blessed mother might not speak one word more to him but fell down to the ground, and so they parted asunder, his mother lying still as if she had been dead, then the said creature thought she took our Lord Jesus Christ by the clothes and fell down at his feet, praying him to bless her, and therewith she cried full loudly and wept right sorely, saying in her mind, "A, Lord, what shall become of me? I had far rather that you would slay me than let me abide in the world without you, for without you I may not abide here, Lord."

Then answered our Lord to her, "Be still, daughter, and rest with my mother here, and comfort you in her, for she who is my own mother must suffer this sorrow. But I shall come again, daughter, to my mother and comfort her and you both and turn all your sorrow into joy."

And then she thought our Lord went forth his way, and she went to our Lady and said, "A, blessed Lady, rise up and let us follow your blessed son as long as we may see him so that I may look enough upon him before he dies. A, dear Lady, how may your heart last and see your blissful son see all this woe? Lady, I may not endure it, and yet am I not his mother."

Then our Lady answered and said, "Daughter, you hear well it will not otherwise be, and therefore I must needs suffer it for my son's love."

And then she thought that they followed forth after our Lord and saw how he made his prayers to his father in the Mount of Olives⁷ and heard the goodly answer that came from his father and the goodly answer that he gave his father in reply. Then she saw how our Lord went to his disciples and bade them wake; his enemies were near. And then came a great multitude of people with much light and many armed men with staves, swords, and poleaxes to seek our Lord Jesus Christ. Our merciful Lord as a meek lamb saying unto them, "Whom seek you?"

They answered with a sharp spirit, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Our Lord said in reply, "*Ego sum.*"⁸

And then she saw the Jews fall down on the ground; they might not stand for dread, but anon they rose again and sought as they had done before. And our Lord asked, "Whom seek you?"

And they said again, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Our Lord answered, "I it am."

And then anon she saw Judas come and kiss our Lord, and the Jews laid hands upon him full violently.⁹

Then had our Lady and she much sorrow and great pain to see the lamb of innocence so contemptibly be held and drawn by his own people that he was specially sent unto. And immediately the said creature beheld with her spiritual eye the Jews putting a cloth before our Lord's eye, beating him and buffeting him in the head and striking him before his sweet mouth, crying full cruelly unto him, "Tell us now who smote you."

They spared not to spit in his face in the most shameful way that they could. And then our Lady and she her unworthy handmaiden for the time wept and sighed full sorely, for the Jews acted so foully and so venomously with her blissful Lord. And they would not spare to pull his blissful ears and pull the hair of his beard. And anon after she saw them draw off his clothes and make him all naked and then

draw him forth before them as if he had been the greatest malefactor in all the world. And he went forth full meekly before them, all mother-naked as he was born, to a pillar of stone and spoke no word against them but let them do and say what they would. And there they bound him to the pillar as straight as they could and beat him on his fair white body with switches, with whips, and with scourges. And then she thought our Lady wept wonderfully sorely. And therefore the said creature must needs weep and cry when she saw such ghostly sights in her soul as freshly and as verily as if it had been done in deed in her bodily sight, and she thought that our Lady and she were always together to see our Lord's pains, such ghostly sights had she every Palm Sunday and every Good Friday, and in many other ways for many years together. And therefore cried she and wept full sorely and suffered full much despite and reproof in many a country.

And then our Lord said to her soul, "Daughter, these sorrows and many more suffered I for your love, and divers pains, more than any man can tell on earth. Therefore, daughter, you have great cause to love me right well, for I have bought your love full dearly."

* * *

1436–38

Endnotes

- Note 6: Margery experiences this vision while participating in a Palm Sunday mass. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: For Christ's betrayal on the Mount of Olives, see Luke 22:39–54 and John 18:3–12. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "I am he" (Latin; see John 18:4–8). [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In this chapter, Kempe participates in a well-established tradition of Christian anti-Judaism, which blames Christ's suffering on the Jewish people. For more on this Christian

ideology and its violent outcomes, see “Religious Exclusions and Identities” (pp. 285–362).[Return to reference 9](#)

MYSTERY PLAYS

The increasing prosperity and importance of late medieval urban culture were on powerful display in performances of the mystery plays—a sequence or “cycle” of plays based on the Bible and produced by the city guilds, organizations representing the various trades and crafts of a given city.

Medieval mystery plays had an immensely confident reach in both space and time. In York, for example, the theatrical space and time of this urban amateur drama was that of the entire city, lasting from sunrise throughout the entire long summer holiday. The time represented ran from the fall of the angels and the creation of the world right through to the end of time, in the Last Judgment. Between these extremities of the beginning and end of time, each cycle presents key episodes of Old Testament narrative, such as the Fall of Adam and Eve in Eden and the flood survived by Noah in his ark, before presenting a concentrated sequence of freely interpreted New Testament plays focused on the life and passion of Christ. The Church had its own drama in Latin, dating back to the tenth century, which developed through the dramatization and elaboration of the liturgy—the regular religious service—for certain holidays, in particular the Easter morning service. The vernacular drama was once thought to have evolved from the liturgical, passing by stages from the church into the streets of the town. However, even though they at times echo their Latin counterparts and though their authors may have been clerics, the mysteries represent an old and largely independent tradition of vernacular religious drama. As early as the

twelfth century, a *Play of Adam* in Anglo-Norman French was performed in England—a dramatization of the Fall with highly sophisticated dialogue, characterization, and stagecraft. During the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, the great English mystery cycles were performed in provincial yet increasingly powerful and independent cities. They were the production of the city itself, with particular responsibility for staging and performance devolving onto the city guilds. A guild was also known as a “mystery,” from Latin *ministerium*, whence the label “mystery plays.” A guild combined the functions of modern trade union, club, religious society, and political action group. The performance and staging required significant investments of time and money from amateur performers, the status of whose mystery might be at stake, in a kind of product placement, in the quality and materials of their performance. Often the subject of the play corresponded to the function of the guild (thus, for example, the Pinners, or nail makers, performed the York Crucifixion). Most of our knowledge of the plays, apart from the texts themselves, comes through municipal and guild records, which tell us a great deal about the evolution, staging, and all aspects of the production of the cycles. In some of the cities each guild had a wagon that served as a stage. The wagon proceeded from one strategic point in the city to another, and the play would be performed a number of times on the same day. In other towns, plays were probably acted out in sequence on a platform erected at a single location such as the main city square.

The cycles were performed every year at the time of one of two great early summer festivals—Whitsuntide, the week following the seventh Sunday after Easter, or Corpus Christi, a week later (falling somewhere between May 21 and June 24). They served as both religious instruction and entertainment for wide audiences, including unlearned folk like the carpenter in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* (lines 405–74), who recalls from them the trouble Noah had getting his wife aboard the ark. The plays also addressed educated laypeople and clerics, who, besides enjoying the sometimes boisterous comedy, would find the plays acting out traditional interpretations of scripture

such as the ark as a type, or prefiguration, of the Church. Thus the cycles were public spectacles watched by every layer of society. The rainbow in *Noah's Flood* and the Angel's *Gloria* in the *Shepherds' Play*, with their messages of mercy and hope, unite actors and audience in a common faith. Yet the first shepherd's opening speech, complaining of taxation and the insolent exploitation of farmers by "gentlery-men," shows how the plays also served as vehicles of social criticism and reveal many of the rifts and tensions in the late medieval social fabric.

The particular intersection of religious and civic institutions that made the cycles possible was put under strain from the beginning of the Reformation in England in the 1530s. Given the strength of civic institutions, the amateur theater of the cycles survived into the reign of Elizabeth; but partly because they were identified with the Catholic Church, they were suppressed by local ecclesiastical (by then Protestant) pressures in each city in the late 1560s and 1570s. The last performance of the York Cycle in 1569 is nearly coincident with the opening of the first professional theater in Whitechapel (London) in 1567. The cycles of several towns are lost. Those of York and Chester have been preserved, the latter in a post-Reformation form. The Towneley plays, sometimes connected with Wakefield (Yorkshire), and those that constitute the so-called N-town plays from East Anglia treat comparable material, as do fragmentary survivals from elsewhere. On the morality play—the other major form of theater that flourished in England in the fifteenth century and continued on into the sixteenth—see the headnote to *Everyman* ([p. 622](#)).

The York Play of the Crucifixion The climax of the mystery cycles is reached with a sequence of plays about the passion, or suffering, of Christ. Everything in each cycle leads up to the Crucifixion, understood by Christians to be the turning point in human history, when the original sin of Adam and Eve is paid for by Christ's suffering and death. No cycle has a more dramatic series of passion plays than that performed at York, the longest of the four extant English cycles. Records of the York mystery plays begin to appear in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, when York was, next to London, England's most populous and prosperous city. Richard II came to see the cycle in 1397. Sometime after 1415 the plays of the passion sequence were extensively revised by a gifted playwright referred to by scholars as the York Realist. The *Crucifixion*, although not written in that author's distinctive alliterative style, has sometimes been attributed to him, and it is, in any case, a powerful example of late medieval dramatic art. It is also an especially moving representation of Christ in his suffering humanity, a theme characteristic of late medieval spirituality.

The York plays leading up to the *Crucifixion* are especially cruel: a silent Jesus is vilified, scourged, crowned with thorns, battered, and mocked in a sadistic game of blindman's buff. Much of the York *Crucifixion* revolves around the mechanical difficulties the soldiers encounter in nailing Jesus to the Cross. The play focuses on the soldiers; they are villains, to be sure, but also ordinary men engaged in what they see as ordinary work. They are not monsters.

The gory details, part of the play's "realism," create a shudder, but the play has larger designs on its audience. While the soldiers are hard at work, the audience sees only them, complaining of bad workmanship by those who bored the nail holes too far apart, necessitating the stretching of Christ's arms. Only when the Cross is raised, and Christ is fully visible, does the audience recognize the full extent to which they have been shielded from the pain inflicted by the soldiers' work. When the Cross is finally vertical, the actor-Christ speaks to "All men that walk by way or street" (see the lyric "Ye That Pasen by the Weye," derived from Lamentations 1:12; [p. 218](#)). He

thereby addresses the spectators in the streets of York as though *they* were representing the crowd around the Cross on Calvary, outside Jerusalem. The actor-Christ's words directly involve and implicate the spectators in the drama and its theme of salvation. The soldiers may concentrate on their "work" of nailing Christ to the Cross, but the audience is prompted to reflect on the relation between daily labor and the "works" of mercy incumbent upon each Christian. The meaning of Christ's words is, however, lost on the soldiers, who truly "know not what they do" and proceed to quarrel about possession of Christ's cloak.

The York Play of the Crucifixion

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JESUS FOUR SOLDIERS

[*Calvary*]

1ST SOLDIER Sir knights, take heed hither in hie, ^o

This deed on dergh we may not draw ¹

Ye woot ^o yourself as well as I

How lords and leaders of our law

Has given doom ^o that this dote ^o shall die.

2ND SOLDIER Sir, all their counsel well we know.

Sen ^o we are comen to Calvary,

Let ilk ^o man help now as him awe. ^o

3RD SOLDIER We are all ready, lo,

This forward ^o to fulfill.

4TH SOLDIER Let hear how we shall do,

And go we tite theretill. ²

1ST SOLDIER It may not help here for to hone, ^o

If we shall any worship ^o win.

2ND SOLDIER He must be dead needlings ^o by noon.

3RD SOLDIER Then is good time that we begin.

4TH SOLDIER Let ding ^o him down, then is he done:

He shall not dere ^o us with his din.

1ST SOLDIER He shall be set and learned soon ³

With care ^o to him and all his kin.

2ND SOLDIER The foulest dead ^o of all

Shall he die for his deeds.

3RD SOLDIER That means cross ^o him we shall.

4TH SOLDIER Behold, so right he reads. ^o

1ST SOLDIER Then to this work us must take heed,
So that our working be not wrang.^o

2ND SOLDIER None other note to neven is need,⁴
But let us haste him for to hang.

3RD SOLDIER And I have gone for gear good speed,^o
Both hammers and nails large and lang.^o

4TH SOLDIER Then may we boldly do this deed.
Come on, let kill this traitor strong.^o

1ST SOLDIER Fair might ye fall in fere⁵
That has wrought on this wise.^o

2ND SOLDIER Us needs not for to lear^o
Such faitours^o to chastise.

3RD SOLDIER Sen ilk a thing is right arrayed,
The wiselier^o now work may we.

4TH SOLDIER The cross on ground is goodly graid,^o
And bored⁶ even as it ought to be.

1ST SOLDIER Look that the lad on length be laid,
And made be fest^o unto this tree.⁷

2ND SOLDIER For all his fare^o he shall be flayed:^o
That on assay⁸ soon shall ye see.

3RD SOLDIER Come forth, thou cursed knave,
Thy comfort soon shall keel.^o

4TH SOLDIER Thine hire^o here shall thou have.

1ST SOLDIER Walk on, now work we weel.^o

JESUS Almighty God, my Father free,^o
Let these matters be made in mind:
Thou bade that I should buxom^o be,
For Adam^o plight for to be pined.^o
Here to dead^o I oblige me⁹
Fro^o that sin for to save mankind,
And sovereignly beseech I thee,¹
That they for me may favor find.

And from the Fiend them fend,^o
So that their souls be safe,
In wealth^o withouten end.
I keep^o nought else to crave.

1ST SOLDIER We,² hark, sir knights, for Mahound's³ blood.
Of Adam-kind^o is all his thought!

2ND SOLDIER The warlock waxes worse than wood.⁴
This doleful dead^o ne dreadeth he nought.

3RD SOLDIER Thou should have mind, with main and mood,⁵
Of wicked works that thou hast wrought.

4TH SOLDIER I hope^o that he had been as good^o
Have ceased of saws that he up sought.⁶

1ST SOLDIER Those saws^o shall rue^o him sore
For all his sauntering⁷ soon.

2ND SOLDIER I'll speed them that him spare⁸
Till he to dead^o be done.

3RD SOLDIER Have done belive,^o boy, and make thee boun^o
And bend thy back unto this tree.

[JESUS *lies down.*]

4TH SOLDIER Behold, himself has laid him down,
In length and breadth as he should be.

1ST SOLDIER This traitor here tainted^o of treasoun,
Go fast and fetch him then, ye three.

And sen^o he claimeth kingdom with crown,
Even as a king here hang shall he.

2ND SOLDIER Now certes I shall not fine^o
Ere his right hand be fest.^o

3RD SOLDIER The left hand then is mine:
Let see who bears him⁹ best.

4TH SOLDIER His limbs on length then shall I lead,^o
And even unto the bore^o them bring.

1ST SOLDIER Unto his head I shall take heed,

And with my hand help him to hing.°

2ND SOLDIER Now sen° we four shall do this deed,

And meddle° with this unthrifty° thing,

Let no man spare for special speed,¹

Till that we have made ending.

3RD SOLDIER This forward° may not fail,

Now are we right arrayed.°

4TH SOLDIER This boy here in our bail°

Shall bide° full bitter braid.°

1ST SOLDIER Sir knights, say, how work we now?

2ND SOLDIER Yes, certes, I hope° I hold this hand.

And to the bore I have it brought,

Full buxomly° withouten band.°

1ST SOLDIER Strike on then hard, for him thee bought.²

2ND SOLDIER Yes, here is a stub° will safely stand:

Through bones and sinews it shall be sought.°

This work is well, I will warrand.°

1ST SOLDIER Say, sir, how do we thore?°

This bargain may not blin.³

3RD SOLDIER It fails° a foot and more,

The sinews are so gone in.°

4TH SOLDIER I hope° that mark° amiss be bored.

2ND SOLDIER Then must he bide° in bitter bale.°

3RD SOLDIER In faith, it was over-scantly scored.⁴

That makes it foully° for to fail.

1ST SOLDIER Why carp° ye so? Fast° on a cord

And tug him to, by top and tail.⁵

3RD SOLDIER Yea, thou commands lightly° as a lord:

Come help to haul, with ill hail.⁶

1ST SOLDIER Now certes° that shall I do

Full snelly° as a snail.

3RD SOLDIER And I shall tach° him to

Full nimbly with a nail.

This work will hold, that dare I heet,_o
For now are fest_o fast both his hend._o

4TH SOLDIER Go we all four then to his feet:
So shall our space_o be speedly_o spend.

2ND SOLDIER Let see, what bourd his bale might beet.₇
Thereto my back now will I bend.

4TH SOLDIER Ow! this work is all unmeet:_o
This boring must be all amend.

1ST SOLDIER Ah, peace, man, for Mahound,₈
Let no man woot_o that wonder,
A rope shall rug_o him down,
If all his sinews go asunder.

2ND SOLDIER That cord full kindly can I knit,_o
The comfort of this carl_o to keel._o

1ST SOLDIER Fest_o on then fast that all be fit.
It is no force_o how fell_o he feel.

2ND SOLDIER Lug on, ye both, a little yit,_o

3RD SOLDIER I shall not cease, as I have seel.₉

4TH SOLDIER And I shall fond_o him for to hit.

2ND SOLDIER Ow, hail!_o

4TH SOLDIER Ho, now I hold_o it weel._o

1ST SOLDIER Have done, drive in that nail
So that no fault be found.

4TH SOLDIER This working would not fail
If four bulls here were bound.

1ST SOLDIER These cords have evil_o increased his pains
Ere_o he were till_o the borings brought.

2ND SOLDIER Yea, asunder are both sinews and veins
On ilk a side, so have we sought._o

3RD SOLDIER Now all his gauds_o nothing him gains:
His sauntering shall with bale be bought.₁

4TH SOLDIER I will go say to our sovereigns
Of all these works how we have wrought.

1ST SOLDIER Nay, sirs, another thing
Falls first to you and me:²
They bade we should him hing_o
On height that men might see.

2ND SOLDIER We woot well so their words were,
But sir, that deed will do us dere._o

1ST SOLDIER It may nought mend_o for to moot_o more:
This harlot_o must be hanged here.

2ND SOLDIER The mortise³ is made fit_o therefore.

3RD SOLDIER Fast on your fingers then, in fere.⁴

4TH SOLDIER I ween_o it will never come there.

We four raise it not right to_o-year.

1ST SOLDIER Say, man, why carps thou so?
Thy lifting was but light._o

2ND SOLDIER He means there must be mo_o
To heave him up on height.

3RD SOLDIER Now certes I hope it shall not need
To call to us more company.

Methink we four should do this deed,
And bear him to yon hill on high.

1ST SOLDIER It must be done withouten dread:_o

No more, but look ye be ready,
And this part shall I lift and lead._o

On length he shall no longer lie.

Therefore now make you boun:_o

Let bear him to yon hill.

4TH SOLDIER Then will I bear here down,
And tent his toes untill.⁵

2ND SOLDIER We two shall see till_o either side,
For else this work will wry_o all wrang._o

3RD SOLDIER We are ready.

4TH SOLDIER Good sirs, abide,
And let me first his feet up fang._o

2ND SOLDIER Why tent ye so to tales this tide?⁶

1ST SOLDIER Lift up!

[*All lift the cross together.*]

4TH SOLDIER Let see!

2ND SOLDIER Ow! Lift along!

3RD SOLDIER From all this harm he should him hide_o
And_o he were God.

4TH SOLDIER The Devil him hang!

1ST SOLDIER For great harm_o I have hent:_o
My shoulder is in sunder.

2ND SOLDIER And certes I am near shent,_o
So long have I born under.⁷

3RD SOLDIER This cross and I in two must twin_o—
Else breaks my back in sunder soon.

4TH SOLDIER Lay down again and leave_o your din.
This deed for us will never be done.

[*They lay it down.*]

1ST SOLDIER Assay,_o sirs, let see if any gin_o
May help him up, withouten hone._o
For here should wight_o men worship win,
And not with gauds_o all day to gone._o

2ND SOLDIER More wighter_o men than we
Full few I hope_o ye find.

3RD SOLDIER This bargain_o will not be,_o
For certes me wants wind.⁸

4TH SOLDIER So will_o of work never we wore._o
I hope this carl some cautels cast.⁹

2ND SOLDIER My burden sat_o me wonder sore:
Unto the hill I might not last.

1ST SOLDIER Lift up and soon he shall be thore._o
Therefore fest_o on your fingers fast.

3RD SOLDIER Ow, lift!

1ST SOLDIER We, lo!

4TH SOLDIER A little more!
2ND SOLDIER Hold then!
1ST SOLDIER How now?
2ND SOLDIER The worst is past.
3RD SOLDIER He weighs a wicked weight.
2ND SOLDIER So may we all four say,
 Ere_o he was heaved on height
 And raised on this array._o

4TH SOLDIER He made us stand as any stones,
So boistous^o was he for to bear.

1ST SOLDIER Now raise him nimbly for the nones,¹
And set him by this mortise here;
And let him fall in all at once,
For certes that pain shall have no peer.^o

3RD SOLDIER Heave up!

4TH SOLDIER Let down, so all his bones
Are asunder now on sides sere.²
[*The cross is raised.*]

1ST SOLDIER That falling was more fell^o
Than all the harms he had.
Now may a man well tell^o
The least lith^o of this lad.

3RD SOLDIER Methinketh this cross will not abide
Nor stand still in this mortise yit.°

4TH SOLDIER At the first was it made overwide:
That makes it wave, thou may well wit.°

1ST SOLDIER It shall be set on ilk a side,
So that it shall no further flit.°

Good wedges shall we take this tide,°
And fast° the foot, then is all fit.

2ND SOLDIER Here are wedges arrayed°
For that, both great and small.

3RD SOLDIER Where are our hammers laid
That we should work withal?

4TH SOLDIER We have them here even at our hand.

2ND SOLDIER Give me this wedge, I shall it in drive.

4TH SOLDIER Here is another yit ordand._o

3RD SOLDIER Do take_o it me hither belive._o

1ST SOLDIER Lay on then fast.

3RD SOLDIER Yes. I warrand._o

I thring them sam, so mote I thrive.₃

Now will this cross ful stably stand:

All if he rave they will not rive.₄

1ST SOLDIER Say, sir, how likes thou now

The work that we have wrought?

4TH SOLDIER We pray you, say us how

Ye feel, or faint ye aught?₅

JESUS All men that walk by way or street,

Take tent—ye shall no travail tine₆—

Behold mine head, mine hands, my feet,

And fully feel now ere_o ye fine_o

If any mourning may be meet_o

Or mischief_o measured unto mine.

My Father, that all bales may bete,₇

Forgive these men that do me pine._o

What they work woot_o they nought:₈

Therefore my Father I crave

Let never their sins be sought,_o

But see their souls to save.

1ST SOLDIER We, hark! he jangles like a jay.

2ND SOLDIER Methink he patters like a pie._o

3RD SOLDIER He has been doand_o all this day,

And made great mening_o of mercy.

4TH SOLDIER Is this the same that gun_o us say

That he was God's son almighty?₉

1ST SOLDIER Therefore he feels full fell affray,₁

And doomed this day was for to die.

2ND SOLDIER Vath! *qui destruis templum!*²

3RD SOLDIER His saws_o were so, certain.

4TH SOLDIER And, sirs, he said to some
He might raise it again.

1ST SOLDIER To muster_o that he had no might,
For all the cautels_o that he could cast;

All if he were in word so wight,³

For_o all his force now is he fast._o

All Pilate deemed is done and dight:_o

Therefore I read_o that we go rest.

2ND SOLDIER This race must be rehearsed right⁴
Through the world both east and west.

2ND SOLDIER Yea, let him hang here still

And make mows on the moon.⁵

4TH SOLDIER Then may we wend_o at will.

1ST SOLDIER Nay, good sirs, not so soon.

For certes us needs another note:⁶

This kirtle_o would I of you crave.

2ND SOLDIER Nay, nay, sir, we will look_o by lot
Which of us four falls_o it to have.

3RD SOLDIER I read_o we draw cut_o for this coat.

Lo, see now soon, all sides to save.⁷

4TH SOLDIER The short cut_o shall win, that well ye woot,_o
Whether it fall to knight or knave.

1ST SOLDIER Fellows, ye thar not flite,⁸

For this mantle is mine.

2ND SOLDIER Go we then hence tite,_o

This travail here we tine.⁹

Endnotes

- Note 1: We may not delay the time of this deed.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: And let's get to it quickly.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: He'll be put in his place and taught quickly.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: There is no need to mention any other business.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: May you all have good luck together.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, bored with holes for the nails, which were probably wooden.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the Cross. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, in actual experience.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Render myself liable.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: And above all I beseech thee.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "We": an exclamation of surprise or displeasure.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Muhammad's; the sacred figures of other religions were considered devils by Christians in the Middle Ages; the soldier is swearing by the Devil.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This devil grows worse than crazy.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: You should think, with all your strength and wits.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, to have ceased of the sayings that he thought up.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Behaving like a saint.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Bad luck to them that spare him.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Handles himself.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Let nobody slacken because of his own welfare.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Drive the nail in hard, for him who redeemed thee (a splendidly anachronistic oath).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This arrangement may not fail; the arrangement is of the four soldiers at the four ends of the cross.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: It was too carelessly bored.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: And stretch him to it, head and toe.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: With bad luck to you.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Let's see, what trick could increase his suffering.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: See note to line 61, above.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: As I may have good luck.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: His acting like a saint (?) shall be paid for with pain.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: You and I must do first.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A hole in the ground shaped to receive the cross.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Fasten your fingers on it, all together.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Then I'll carry the part down here and attend to his toes.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Why are you so intent on talking at a time like this?[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: So long have I borne it up.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: For certainly I am out of breath.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I think this knave cast some spells.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: For the purpose.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Are pulled apart on every side.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: I press them together, so may I thrive.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Even if he struggles, they will not budge.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Or do you feel somewhat faint?[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Take heed, you shall not lose your labor.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: My father, who may remedy all evils.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: See Luke 23:34.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That he was the son of almighty God.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: For that he suffers a full cruel assault.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Faith thou who destroys the temple (Latin; see Mark 14:58, John 2:19).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Even though he was so clever in words.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This course of action must be retold correctly.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: And make faces at the moon.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: For surely we have another piece of business to settle.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See now straightway, to protect all parties.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Fellows, you don't need to quarrel.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: We're wasting our time here.[Return to reference 9](#)

Notes

- °: *haste*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *judgment* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fool*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *each* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ought*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *delay*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *honor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *of necessity*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *strike*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *annoy*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sorrow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *death*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *crucify*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *speaks*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *wrong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flagrant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in this manner*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fakers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more skillfully*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fastened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behavior* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beaten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grow cold*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *payment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *obedient*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Adam's* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tortured*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *defend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *welfare*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mankind*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sayings* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *convicted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stop*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *fastened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stretch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hole*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unrewarding*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *control*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abide* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *treatment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *effortlessly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cord*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nail*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *driven*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *warrant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *falls short*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shrunk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hole*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *badly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fasten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *readily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attach*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fastened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hands*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *well*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrongly done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jerk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *diminish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fasten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *matter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *badly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *try*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pull*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *badly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afflicted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tricks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improve* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *argue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rascal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *this*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turn out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrong*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *take*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *protect*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injury*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *received*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ruined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *separate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *try*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pranks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stronger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrangement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *work*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at a loss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vexed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fasten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bulky*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cruel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *count*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joint*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *move*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *fasten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *give* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guarantee*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *matched with*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injury*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *searched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *magpie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doing so*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *talk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sayings*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *exhibit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *charms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *despite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *caught*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accomplished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tunic*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *see*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chances*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lots*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °

The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play In

putting on the stage biblical shepherds and soldiers, medieval playwrights usually and often quite deliberately gave them the appearance and characters of contemporary men and women. No play better illustrates this aspect of the drama than the *Second Shepherds' Play*, included in the Towneley collection of mystery plays and imaginatively based on scriptural material typical of the cycles. As the play opens, the shepherds complain about the cold, the taxes, and the high-handed treatment they get from the gentry—evils closer to shepherds on the Yorkshire moors than to those keeping their flocks near Bethlehem.

The sophisticated dramatic intelligence at work in this and several other of the Wakefield plays belonged undoubtedly to one individual, who probably revised older, more traditional plays sometime during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. His identity is not known, but because of his achievement scholars refer to him as the Wakefield Master. He was probably a highly educated cleric stationed in the vicinity of Wakefield. The Wakefield Master had a genius for combining comedy, including broad farce, with religion in ways that make these elements enhance one another. In the *Second Shepherds' Play*, by linking the comic subplot of Mak and Gill with the solemn story of Christ's nativity, the Wakefield Master has produced a dramatic parable of what the Nativity means in Christian history and in Christian hearts. No one will fail to observe the parallels between the stolen sheep, ludicrously disguised as Mak's latest heir, lying in the cradle, and the real Lamb of God, born in the stable among beasts. A complex of relationships based on this connection suggests itself. But perhaps the most important point is that the charity twice shown by the shepherds—in the first instance to the supposed son of Mak and in the second instance to Mak and Gill, who are let off with only the mildest of punishments—is rewarded when they are invited to visit the Christ child, the embodiment of charity. The bleak beginning of the play, with its series of individual complaints, is ultimately balanced by the optimistic ending, which sees the shepherds once again singing

together in harmony. The *Second Shepherds' Play* is exceptional among the mystery plays in its development of plot and character. There is no parallel to its elaboration of the comic subplot and no character quite like Mak, who has doubtless been imported into religious drama from popular farce. Mak is perhaps the best humorous character in this period outside of Chaucer's works. A braggart of the worst kind, he has something of the charm of Shakespeare's Falstaff, and he resembles Falstaff also in his grotesque attempts to maintain the last shreds of his dignity when he is caught in a lie. Most readers will be glad that the shepherds do not carry out their threat to have the death penalty invoked for his crime.

Following the 1994 edition of the Early English Text Society, the stanza, traditionally printed as nine lines (with an opening quatrain of four long lines, the first halves of which rhyme with one another), is rendered here as "thirteeners," rhyming *a b a b a b a b c d d d c*.

The Second Shepherds' Play¹

CAST OF CHARACTERS

COLL GILL

GIB ANGEL

MAK MARY

DAW

[*A field.*]

[*Enter* COLL.]

COLL Lord, how this weather is cold,
And I am ill wrapped;
I am numb with cold
So long have I napped;
My legs they fold,
5 My fingers are chapped.
It is not as I would,
For I am all lapped

In sorrow:
In storms and tempest,
10 Now in the east, now in the west,
Woe is him that never has rest
Midday nor morrow!

But we hapless husbands^o
Who walk on the moor,
15 In faith we are nearhands^o
Out of the door.^o
No wonder, as it stands

If we be poor,
For the earth of our lands
20 Lies fallow as the floor,²
 As you ken.^o
We are so hammed,
Fortaxed, and rammed,
We are made hand-tamed
25 By these gentlery-men.

Thus they rob us our rest—
Our Lady them harry
These lords' men are pests,
Who cause the plow tarry.
30 What men say is for the best—
We find it contrary.
Thus are farmers oppressed
In point to miscarry
 In life.
35 Thus hold they us under,
Thus they bring us in blunder,
It were a great wonder
 If ever should we thrive.

40 For may he get a paint-sleeve³
Or brooch nowadays,
Woe is him that him grieves
Or once gainsays.
Dare no man tell him leave
With whatever force that he may.^o
45 And yet may no man believe
One word that he says,
 No letter.
He can make purveyance⁴
With boast and bragance,
50 And all is through maintenance⁵

Of men that are greater.

There shall come a swain^o
As proud as a po:^o
He must borrow my wain,^o
55 My plow also;
Then I am full fain^o
To grant ere he go.
Thus live we in pain,
Anger, and woe,
60 By night and by day.
He must have if he wants it,
Even if I should forgo it.
I were better be hanged
Than once say him nay.

65
It does me good, as I walk
Thus by mine own
Of this world for to talk
In manner of moan.
To my sheep I will stalk,
70 And hearken anon,
There abide on a balk,⁶
Or sit on a stone,
Full soon;
For I think pardie,^o
75 True men if they be,
We get more company
Ere it be noon.

[*Enter GIB, who initially does not see COLL.*]

GIB Bensté Dominus,⁷
What may this mean?
80 Why fares this world thus?
Oft have we not seen.

Lord, these weathers aren't piteous
And the winds are full keen,
And the frosts so hideous
85 They water mine eien,o
 No lie.
Now in dry, now in wet,
Now in snow, now in sleet,
When my shoes freeze to my feet
90 It is not all easy.

But as far as I ken,o
Or yet as I go,
We poor married men
Suffer much woe;
95 We have sorrow then and then—
It falls oft so.
Silly Copple, our hen,8
Both to and fro
 She cackles;
100 But begin she to croak,
To groan or to cluck,
Woe is him, our cock,
 For he is in shackles.

These men that are wed
105 Have not all their will:
When they are full hard steado
They sigh full still;
God knows they are led
Full hard and full ill;
110 In bower nor in bed
They speak not their will.
 This tideo
My part have I found
I know my lesson:
115 Woe is him that is bound,

For he must abide.

But now late in our lives—
A marvel to me,
That I think my heart rives^o
120 Such wonders to see;
What that destiny drives
It must so be—
Some men will have two wives,
And some men three
125 In store.⁹
Some are sad that has any,
But so far as know I,
Woe is him that has many,
For he feels sore.

130 But young men awooing,
For God that you bought,^o
Be well ware of wedding
And think in your thought:
“Had I known” is a thing
135 That serves of nought.
Much secret mourning
Has wedding home brought,
And griefs,
With many a sharp shower,^o
140 For you may catch in an hour
That will vex you full sour
As long as you live.

For as ever read in ‘pistle,¹
145 I have one by my fire
As sharp as a thistle,
As rough as a briar.
She is browed like a bristle,
With a sourpuss cheer;

150 Had she once wet her whistle
She could sing full clear
Her Pater Noster.²
She is great as a whale;
She has a gallon of gall:
By him that died for us all,
155 I would I had run till I'd lost her.
COLL God look over the row!
[to GIB] Full deafly you stand!
GIB Yea, the devil in your maw^o
So standing around!
160 Saw you anywhere Daw?
COLL Yea, on feedland
Heard I him blow.
He comes here at hand,
Not far.
165 Stand still.
GIB Why?
COLL For he comes, think I.
GIB He will make us both a lie
Unless we be ware.

*[Enter the boy DAW, who does not see the two
older shepherds.]*

170 DAW Christ's cross me speed
And Saint Nicholas!
Thereof had I need:
It is worse than it was.
Whoso could take heed
And let the world pass,
175 It is ever in dread
And brittle as glass,
And slide.^o
This world was never so,
With marvels more and more,

180 Now in weal, now in woe,
And no thing abides.

Was never since Noah's flood
Such waters seen,
Winds and rains so rude
185 And storms so keen:
Some stammered, some stood
In fear as I deem
Now God turn all to good!
I say as I mean.

190 For ponder:
These floods so they drown
Both in fields and in town,
And bears all down,
And that is a wonder

195 We that walk on the nights
Our cattle to keep,
We see sudden sights
When other men sleep.
Yet methink my heart lights:
200 I see rascals peep.

[He sees the others, but does not greet them.]

You are two tall wights.^o
I will give my sheep
A turn.
But full ill have I meant:³
205 As I walk on this bent^o
I may quickly repent,
My toes if I spurn.^o

Ah, sir, God you save,
And master mine!
210

A drink would I have,
And somewhat to dine.
COLL Christ's curse, my knave,
You're a lazy child!
GIB What, the boy's set to rave!
Abide for a while
215 We have eaten it.°
Ill thrift on thy pate!⁴
Though the rascal came late
Yet is he in state
220 To dine—if he had it.

DAW Such servants as I,
Who sweat and swink,°
Eat our bread full dry,
And that me forthinks°
225 We are oft wet and weary
When master-men wink,°
Yet comes full lately
Both dinners and drink.
But nately°
230 Both our dame and our sire,
When we have run in the mire,
They can nip at our hire,
And pay us full lately.

235 But here my oath, master,
For the food that ye make
I shall earn thereafter:
Work as I take.
I shall do a little, sir,
And between times lake,°
240 For too much supper
Lay never on my stomach
In fields.
Whereto should I threap?°

245 With my staff can I leap,
And men say, "Bargaining cheap
Poor return yields."

COLL You'd be an ill lad
Yourself to defend
With a man that had
250 But little to spend.

GIB Peace, boy, I bade—
No more to this end,
Or I shall make thee full rad,^o
By the heaven's King!
255 With thy gauds^o—
Where are our sheep, boy?—we scorn.⁵

DAW This same day at morn
I left them in the corn^o
260 When they rang Lauds.⁶

They have pasture good,
They cannot go wrong.
COLL That is right. By the rood,^o
These nights are long!
Yet I would, ere we yode,^o
265 Come, give us a song.

GIB So I thought as I stood,
To cheer us among.^o

DAW I grant.
COLL Let me sing the tenory.^o

270 GIB And I the treble so hee.^o

DAW Then the mean falls to me.
Let see how you chant.

[*They sing.*]

[*Enter MAK, cloaked.*]⁷

MAK Now, Lord, for thy names seven,
That made both moon and stars
275 Well more than I can neven,o
Thy will, Lord, now me mars.
I am all uneven—
That moves oft my harns.o
Now would God I were in heaven,
280 For there weep no barnso
Ever still.

COLL Who is that pipes so poor?

MAK [*aside*] Would God you knew how I foor!o
[*aloud*] Lo, a man that walks on the moor
285 And has not all his will.

GIB Mak, where have you gone?
Tell us tidings.

DAW Is he come? Then each one
290 Take heed to his things.8

[*Snatches the cloak off him.*]

MAK What! Ich⁹ be a yeoman,
I tell you, of the king,
The self and the same,
Sent by a great lording
And sich.o
295 Fie on you! Go hence
Out of my presence:
I must have reverence.
Why, who be ich?

300 COLL Why make ye it so quaint?o
Mak, ye do wrong.

GIB But, Mak, why play the saint?
Why keep it up so long?

DAW I think the rascal can paint^o—
 The devil might him hang!
 305 MAK Ich shall make complaint
 And make you all to thwang^o
 At a word,
 And tell just how ye doth.
 COLL But Mak, is that sooth?
 310 Now take out that Southern tooth,¹
 And set it in turd!

GIB Mak, the devil in your ee!^o
 A stroke would I give you!
 DAW Mak, know ye not me?
 By God, I could irk you.
 315 MAK God protect you all three:
 I thought I had seen you.
 You are a fair company.

COLL You now remember it's you?²
 320 GIB Crook, peep!^o
 Thus late as it goes,
 What will men suppose?
 And you have an ill nose^o
 Of stealing sheep.
 325

MAK And I am true as steel,
 All men know
 But a sickness I feel
 That holds me full low:
 My belly fares not well,
 330 It is out of estate.
 DAW Seldom lies the devil
 Dead by the gate.³
 MAK Therefore
 Full sore am I and ill
 335 If I stand stone-still,
 I eat not a needle,

This month and more.

COLL How fares thy wife? By my hood,
How fares sho?°
340 MAK Lies sprawling, by the rood,°
By the fire, lo!
And a house full of brood.
She drinks well, too:
That's the only good
345 That she will do!
But sho
Eats as fast as she can;
And each year that comes to man
She brings forth a bairn°
350 And some years two.

But were I now more prosperous
And richer by far,
I'd still be eaten out of house
And of harbar.°
355 Yet is she a foul douce,°
If you come nar:°
There is none that trows°
Nor knows a war°
Than know I.
360 Now will you see what I proffer:
To give all in my coffer
Tomorrow I'd offer
Her head-mass penny.⁴

365 GIB I know so forwaked°
Is none in this shire.
I would sleep if° I taked
Less to my hire.
DAW I am cold and naked
And would have a fire.

370 COLL I am weary forraked^o
And run in the mire.
The guard is you!^o

[Lies down.]

GIB Nay, I will lie down by,
375 For I must sleep, truly.

[Lies down beside him.]

DAW As good a man's son was I
As any of you.

[Lies down and signals to MAK to lie between them.]

But Mak, come hither, between
Shall you lie down.

380 MAK Then might I stop your team
Of what you would row^o,
No dread.^o

[Lies down and prays.]

From my top to my toe,
Manus tuas commendo
385 *Pontio Pilato*⁵

Christ's cross me speed!^o

*[He rises as the others sleep and speaks.]*⁶

Now were time for a man
That lacks what he wold^o
To stalk privily then
390 Unto a fold,
And nimble to work than,

And be not too bold,
For he might pay dear the bargain
If it were told

395 At the end.
Now were time for to reel:°
But he needs good counsel
That fain would fare well
And has but little to spend.

*[He draws a magic circle around the shepherds
and utters a spell.]*

400 But about you a circle
As round as a moon,
Til I have done what I will,
Till that it be noon,
That ye lie stone-still
Until that I have done;
405 And I shall say theretill°
Of good words a foon:°

“On hight,°
Over your heads my hand I lift.
Out go your eyes! Block your sight!”
410 But yet I must make better shift
If it’s to be right.

Lord, how they sleep hard—
That may you all hear.
Was I never a shepherd,
415 But now will I lear.°
The flock may be scared,
Yet shall I nip near.

[He grabs one.]

How! Draw hitherward!

420 Now mends our cheer
From sorrow.
A fat sheep, I dare say!
A good fleece, dare I lay!
Repay when I may,
425 But this will I borrow.

*[Goes with the sheep to his cottage and calls
from outside.]*

How, Gill, art you in?
Get us some light.
GILL *[inside]* Who makes such a din
This time of the night?
I am set for to spin;
430 There's no way I might
Rise, a penny to win.
I curse them on height!_
So fares
A housewife that has been
435 Harried thus between:
Here may no reward be seen
For such small chares._
MAK Good wife, open the hek!_
Don't you see what I bring?
440 GILL Just draw the sneck._
Ah, come in, my darling.
MAK Yea, no need to reck_
About keeping me standing.

[She opens the door.]

445 GILL By the naked neck
Are you like for to hang.
MAK No way!
I deserve my meat,

For in a pinch I can get
More than they that sweat
450 All the long day.

Thus it fell to my lot,
Gill, I had such grace.
GILL It were a foul blot
To be hanged for the case.
455 MAK I have escaped, Jelot,°
From as hard a glase.°
GILL But "So long goes the pot
To the water," men says,
"At last
460 Comes it home broken."
MAK Well know I the token,°
But let it never be spoken!
But come and help fast.

I would it were flain,°
465 I sure wish to eat:
This twelvemonth was I not so fain
Of one sheep-meat.

GILL Come they ere it be slain,
And hear the sheep bleat—
470 MAK Then might I be ta'en°—
That were a cold sweat!
Go spar°
The street-door.

GILL Yes, Mak,
For if they come at thy back—
475 MAK Then might I pay, for all the pack,
The devil of the war.°

GILL A good ploy have I spied,
Since you have none.
480 Here shall we him hide

Till they be gone,
In my cradle. Abide!
Let me alone,
And I shall lie beside
485 In childbed and groan.
MAK Get you red,^o
And I shall say you were light^o
Of a boy-child this night.
GILL Now well is the day bright
490 That ever I was bred.^o

This is a good guise^o
And a far-cast:^o
Yet a woman's advice
Helps at the last.
495 I know never who spies:
To it, go fast.
MAK Unless I come ere they rise,
There blows a cold blast.
I will go sleep.
500

[Returns to the sleeping shepherds.]

Yet sleeps all this meny,^o
And I shall go stalk privily,
As it had never been I
That carried their sheep.

[Lies down between them.]

[The shepherds are waking up.]

505 COLL *Resurrex a mortuus!*⁷
Have hold my hand!
*Judas carnas dominus!*⁸
I may not well stand.

My foot sleeps, by Jesus,
 And I totter fastand.°
 510 I thought we had laid us
 Full near England.
 GIB Ah, yea?
 Lord, how I have slept well!
 As fresh as an eel,
 515 As light I me feel
 As leaf on a tree.

DAW Bensté° be herein!
 So my body quakes,
 My heart is out of skin,
 520 Whatever it makes.°
 Who makes all this din?
 So my skin blakes°
 To the door will I win.°
 Hark, fellows, wakes!
 525 We were four:
 See ye anywhere of Mak now?
 COLL We were up ere you.
 GIB Man, I give God avow
 Yet went he naw're.°
 530

DAW Methought he was lapped
 In a wolfskin.
 COLL So are many happed°
 Now, especially within.
 DAW When we had long napped,
 535 Methought with a gin°
 A fat sheep he trapped,
 But he made no din.
 GIB Be still!
 Thy dream makes thee wood.°
 540 It is but phantom, by the rood.°
 COLL Now God turn all to good,

If it be his will.

[They wake up MAK, who pretends to have been asleep.]

GIB Rise, Mak, for shame!

You lie right long.

545 MAK Now Christ's holy name

Be us among!

What is this? For Saint Jame,

I may not well be gone.

I think I be the same.

550 Ah, my neck has lain wrong.

[One of them twists his neck.]

Enough!

Much thank! Since yestereven

Now, by Saint Stephen,

I was flayed with a sweven^o—

555 My heart out of slough.¹

I thought Gill began to croak

And labor full sad,^o

Well-near at the first cock,

Of a young lad,

560 For to grow our flock—

Then be I never glad:

I have tow on my rock²

More than ever I had.

Ah, my head!

565 A house full of young tharms!^o

The devil knock out their harns!^o

Woe is him has many barns,^o

And thereto little bread.

570 I must go home, by your leave,
To Gill, as I thought.°
I pray you look to my sleeve,
That I steal nought.
I am loath you to grieve
Or from you take aught.
575 DAW Go forth! Ill might thou chieve!°
Now would I we sought
This morn,
That we had all our store.°
580 COLL But I will go before.
Let us meet.
GIB Whore?°
DAW At the crooked thorn.

[MAK's *house*. MAK *is at the door*.]

MAK Undo this door!
585 GILL Who is here?
MAK How long shall I stand?
GILL Who makes such a stir?
Now walk in the weniand!°
MAK Ah, Gill, what cheer?
It is I, Mak, your husband.
590 GILL Then may we see here
The devil in a band,³
Sir Guile!
Lo, he comes with a lote°
As° he were held by the throat:
595 I may not sit at my note°
A short while.

MAK Will you hear what fuss she makes
To get her a glose?°
And does nought but lakes°

And scratches her toes?
600 GILL Why, who wanders? Who wakes?
Who comes? Who goes?
Who brews? Who bakes?
What makes me thus hoarse?
605 And then
It is ruth to behold,
Now in hot, now in cold,
Full woeful is the household
That lacks a woman.

610 But what end have you made
With the shepherds, Mak?
MAK The last word that they said
When I turned my back,
They would look that they had
615 Their sheep all the pack.
I don't think they'll be well paid^o
When they their sheep lack.
Pardie!^o
But how-so the game goes,
620 It's me they'll suppose,^o
And make a foul noise,
And cry out upon me.

But you must do as you hight.^o
GILL I accord me theretill.^o
I shall swaddle him right
625 In my cradill.

*[She enfolds the sheep and puts it in the
cradle.]*

If it were a greater sleight,^o
Yet could I help still.
I will lie down straight.^o
630

Come cover me.
MAK I will.

[*Covers her.*]

GILL Behind
Come Coll and his marrow,⁴
They will nip us full narrow.
635 MAK But I may cry "Out, harrow,"⁵
The sheep if they find.

GILL Hearken ay when they call—
They will come anon.
Come and make ready all,
640 And sing by your own.
Sing "lullay"^o you shall,
For I must groan
And cry out by the wall
On Mary and John
645 For sore.^o
Sing "lullay" on fast
When you hear them at last,
And if I don't play a false cast,^o
Trust me no more.

650

[*The shepherds meet again.*]

DAW Ah, Coll, good morn.
Why sleep you not?
COLL Alas, that ever I was born!
We have a foul blot:
A fat wether^o have we lorn.^o
655 DAW Marry, God's forbot!^o
GIB Who should do us that scorn?
That were a foul spot!^o
COLL Some shrew.^o

660 I have sought with my dogs
All Horbury⁶ shrogs,_°
And of fifteen hogs
I found only a ewe.⁷

DAW Now believe me, if you will,
By Saint Thomas of Kent,
665 Either Mak or Gill
Was of that assent.

COLL Peace, man, be still!
I saw when he went.
You slander him ill—
670 You ought to repent
With speed.

GIB Now as ever might I thee,_°
If I should even here dee,_°
I would say it were he
675 That did that same deed.

DAW Go we thither, I read,_°
And run on our feet.
Shall I never eat bread
The truth till I weet._°

680 COLL Nor drink in my head,
With him till I meet.

GIB I will rest in no stead_°
Till that I him greet,
My brother.

685 One thing I hight:_°
Till I see him in sight
Shall I never sleep one night
Where I do in another.

[*The shepherds outside MAK's house. MAK and
GILL are inside; GILL lies in bed, groaning; MAK
sings a lullaby.*]

690 DAW Will you hear how they hack?⁸
Our sire wants to croon.

COLL Heard I never none crack^o
So clear out of tune.
Call on him.

GIB Mak!

Undo your door soon!^o

695 MAK Who is that spake,
As if it were noon,
On loft?^o

Who is that, I say?

700 DAW Good fellows, if it were day.⁹

MAK As far as you may,
[opening] Good, men speak soft

Over a sick woman's head
That is at malease.^o
705 I had rather be dead
Ere she had any disease.^o

GILL Go to another stead!^o

I may not well wheeze:^o
Each foot that ye tread
710 Goes through my nese.^o
So, hee!^o

COLL Tell us, Mak, if you may,
How fare you, I say?

715 MAK But are you in this town^o today?
Now how fare ye?

You have run in the mire
And are wet yit.
I shall make you a fire
If you will sit.
720 A nurse would I hire.
Think you on yit?¹

Well quit is my hire—
 My dream this is it—
 A season.²
 725 I have babes, if ye knew,
 Wel more than enew:°
 But we must drink as we brew,
 And that is but reason.

730 I would you dined ere you yode.°
 Methink that you sweat.
 GIB Nay, neither amends our mood,
 Drink nor meat.°
 MAK Why sir, ails you aught but good?³
 DAW Yea, our sheep that we get°
 735 Are stolen as they yode:°
 Our loss is great.
 MAK Sirs, drinks!
 Had I been there,
 Some should have suffered full sore.
 740 COLL Marry, some men think that you were,
 And that us forthinks.°

GIB Mak, some men trows,°
 That it should be ye.
 DAW Either you or your spouse,
 745 So say we.
 MAK Now if you have suspouse°
 To Gill or to me,
 Come and ransack the house
 And then may you see
 750 Who had her⁴—
 If I any sheep fot,°
 Either cow or stot⁵—
 And Gill my wife rose not
 Here since she laid her.°
 755

As I am true and leal,^o
To God here I pray
That this be the first meal
That I shall eat this day.
760 COLL Mak, as I have sele,⁶
Advise thee, I say:
He learned timely to steal
That could not say nay.⁷

[*They begin to search.*]

GILL I swelt!^o
765 Out, thieves, from my wonnes!^o
You come to rob us for the nones.^o
MAK Hear you not how she groans?
Your hearts should melt.

GILL Out, thieves, my barn!^o
Approach him not thore!^o
770 MAK If you knew how she'd farn,^o
Your hearts would be sore.
You do wrong, I you warn,
That thus come before^o
To a woman that has farn^o—
775 But I say no more.

GILL Ah, my middle!
I pray to God so mild,
If ever I you beguiled,
That I'll eat this child
780 That lies in this cradle.

MAK Peace, woman, for God's pain,
And cry not so!
You're harming your brain
And make me full woe.
785

GIB I think our sheep is slain.
What find you two?

DAW All work we in vain;
As well may we go.

790 But hatters!⁸
I can find no flesh,
Hard nor nesh,^o
Salt nor fresh,
But two empty platters.

795 Live creatures but this,^o
Tame nor wild,
None, as I have bliss,
As bad as he smelled.

[Approaches the cradle.]

GILL No, so God me bless,
And give me joy of my child!

800 COLL We have aimed amiss—
I judge us beguiled.

GIB Sir, don!^o
[to MAK] Sir—Our Lady him save!—
Is your child a knave?^o

805 MAK Any lord might him have,
This child, as his son.⁹

When he wakens he kips,^o
That joy is to see.

810 DAW In good time to his hips,
And in sely.¹
But who were his gossips,^o
So soon ready?

MAK So fair fall their lips²—

815 COLL Hark, now, a lee,^o
MAK So God them thank,

Perkin, and Gibbon Waller, I say,
And gentle John Horne, in good fay—
He made all the garray—
820 With the great shank.³

GIB Mak, friends will we be,
For we are all one.
MAK We? Now I hold for me,
For amends get I none.
825 Farewell all three,
We'd be glad were you gone.
DAW Fair words may there be,
But love is there none
This year.

[They go out the door.]

830 COLL Gave ye the child anything?
GIB I trow not one farthing.
DAW Fast again will I fling.
Abide ye me there.

[He returns quickly.]

Mak, take it no grief
If I come to your barn.
835 MAK Nay, thou does me great repleif,
And foul has thou farn.
DAW The child it will not grief,
That little day-starn.
840 Mak, with your leave,
Let me give your barn
But sixpence.
MAK Nay, do way! He sleeps.
DAW Methinks he peeps.
MAK When he wakens he weeps.
845

I pray you go hence.

[The other shepherds come back into the cottage.]

DAW Give me leave him to kiss,
And lift up the clout.^o

[Raises the cover.]

What the devil is this?

He has a long snout!

850 COLL He is shaped amiss.
There's ill about.

GIB Ill-spun weft, ywis,
Ay comes foul out.⁴

Aye, so!

855 He is like to our sheep.

DAW How, Gib, may I peep?

COLL I trow kind will creep
Where it may not go.⁵

860 GIB This was a quaint gaud
And a far-cast.⁶

It was high fraud.

DAW Yea, sirs, was't.

Let's burn this bawd^o

And bind her fast.

865 A false scold
Should hang at the last:
So shall thou.

Will you see how they swaddle

His four feet in the middle?

870 Saw I never in the cradle
A horned lad ere now.

MAK Peace bid I! What,
Let be your fare!^o

875 I am he that him gat.o
 And yond woman him bare.
 COLL What devil shall he hat?7
 Lo, God, Mak's heir!
 GIB Let be all that!
 Now God give him careo—
 880 I saw.
 GILL A pretty child is he
 As sits on a woman's knee,
 A dillydown,o pardie,o
 To make a man laugh.
 885
 DAW I know him by the earmark—
 That is a good token.
 MAK I tell you, sirs, hark,
 His nose was broken.
 Then told me a clerk
 890 That he was forspoken.o
 COLL This is a false work.
 I would fain be wroken.o
 Get weapon.
 GILL He was taken by an elf 8
 895 I saw it myself—
 When the clock struck twelf
 Was he forshapen.o

 GIB You two are well fefto
 Together in a stead.o
 900 DAW Since they maintain their theft,
 Put them to death.
 MAK If I trespass eft,o
 Cut off my head.
 With you will I be left.9
 905 COLL Sirs, do my read:o
 For this trespass
 We will neither curse nor flite,o

Fight nor chide,
But have done as tite,o
910 And cast him in canvas.

[*They toss MAK in a blanket.*]

[*The fields.*]

COLL Lord, how I am sore,
In point for to burst!
In faith, I may no more—
Therefore will I rest.
915 GIB As a sheep of seven score¹
He weighed in my fist:
For to sleep anywhere
Methink that I list.o

DAW Now I pray you
920 Lie down on this green.
COLL On the thieves yet I mean.o
DAW Whereto should ye teen?o
Do as I say you.

[*They lie down.*]

[*An ANGEL sings Gloria in Excelsis and then speaks.*]²

925 ANGEL Rise, herdmen hend,o
For now is he born
That shall take from the fiend
That Adam had lorn;o
That devil to shend,o
This night is he born.
930 God is made your friend
Now at this morn,
He behestys.o

At Bedlem^o go see:
There lies that free,^o
935 In a crib full poorly,
Betwixt two bestys.^o

[*The ANGEL retires.*]

COLL This was a strange steven^o
That ever yet I heard.
It is a marvel to neven^o
940 Thus to be scared.

GIB Of God's Son of heaven
He spake upward.^o
All the woods on a leven^o
Methought that he gard^o
945 Appear.

DAW He spake of a barn^o
In Bedlem, I you warn.^o

COLL That betokens yond starn.^o
Let us seek him there.
950

GIB Say, what was his song?
Heard ye not how he cracked it?^o
Three breves^o to a long?

DAW Yea, marry, he hacked it.
Was no crochet³ wrong,
955 Nor nothing that lacked it.^o

COLL For to sing us among,
Right as he knacked it,
I can.^o

GIB Let see how ye croon!
960 Can ye bark at the moon?

DAW Hold your tongues! Have done!

COLL Hark after, than!

[*Sings.*]

GIB To Bedlem he bade
 That we should gang:°
 965 I am full fard°
 That we tarry too lang.°
 DAW Be merry and not sad;
 Of mirth is our sang:
 Everlasting glad°
 970 Our reward may we fang.°
 COLL Without noise
 Hie° we thither forthy°
 To that child and that lady;
 Though we be wet and weary,
 975 We have it not to lose.⁴

GIB We find by the prophecy—
 Let be your din!—
 Of David and Isaiah,
 And more than I mention
 980 That prophesied by clergy°
 That in a virgin
 Should he alight and lie,
 To quench our sin
 And relieve it,
 985 Humankind from woe,
 For Isaiah said so:
Ecce virgo
*Concipiet*⁵ a child that is naked.

990 DAW Full glad may we be
 If we abide that day
 That lovely lad to see,
 That all mights may.°
 Lord, well were me
 For once and for ay°
 995 Might I kneel on my knee,

Some word for to say
 To that child.
 But the angel said
 In a crib was he laid,
 1000 He was poorly arrayed,
 Both humble and mild.

COLL Patriarchs that has been,
 And prophets befor,o
 That desired to have seen
 1005 This child that is born,
 They are gone full clean—
 That have they lorn.o6
 We shall see him, I ween,o
 Ere it be morn,
 1010 To token.o
 When I see him and feel,
 Then know I full well
 It is true as steel
 What prophets have spoken:
 1015 To so poor as we are
 That he would appear,
 First find and declareo
 By his messenger.

GIB Go we now, let us fare,
 The place is us near.
 1020 DAW I am ready and yare;o
 Go we in fereo
 To that bright.o
 Lord, if thy will be—
 1025 We are unlettered all three—
 Grant us some glee
 To comfort your wight.o

[They go to Bethlehem and enter the stable.]

COLL Hail, comely and clean!°
Hail, young child!
1030 Hail Maker, as I mean,°
Of a virgin so mild!
You have cursed I ween,°
The warlock° so wild.
The false guiler of teen,°
1035 Now goes he beguiled.
Lo, he merries!°
Lo, he laughs, my sweeting!
A well fair meeting!
I have holden my heting:°
1040 Have a bob° of cherries.

GIB Hail, sovereign Saviour,
For you has us sought!
Hail freely food° and flour,°
That all thing has wrought!°
1045 Hail, full of favour,
That made all of nought!
Hail! I kneel and I cower.°
A bird have I brought
To my barn.°
1050 Hail, little tiny mop!°
Of our creed thou art crop.°
I would drink on thy cup,
Little day-starn.°

1055 DAW Hail, darling dear,
Full of Godhead!
I pray you be near
When that I have need.
Hail, sweet is thy cheer°—
My heart would bleed
1060 To see you sit here

In so poor weed,^o
With no pennies.
Hail, put forth your dall!^o
I bring you but a ball:
1065 Have and play thee withal,
And go to the tennis.

MARY The Father of heaven,
God omnipotent,
That set all on seven,^o
1070 His Son has he sent.
My name could he never,^o
And light ere he went.^z
I conceived him full even
Through might as he meant.^o
1075 And now is he born.
May he keep you from woe!
I shall pray him so.
Tell forth as you go,
And think on this morn.
1080

COLL Farewell, lady,
So fair to behold,
With your child on your knee.

GIB But he lies full cold.
Lord, well is me.
1085 Now we go, you behold.

DAW Forsooth, already
It seems to be told
Full oft.

COLL What grace we have fun!^o
GIB Come forth, now are we won!^o
1090 DAW To sing are we bun:^o
Let's take on loft.⁸

[*They sing.*]

Endnotes

- Note 1:
The text is distantly based on the (1994) edition by A. C. Cawley and Martin Stevens, but it has been significantly altered so as to facilitate comprehension and performance. Non-rhyme words have been frequently replaced by modern equivalents; some rhyme words have been modernized where the rhyme can be preserved. Spelling has been normalized except where rhyme makes changes impossible. The result is a text that retains the flavor of the original while being readily intelligible to a reader of modern English. The text presented here could be performed for a modern audience. The original text does not signal changes of scene, of which there are many. The original does supply four stage directions, in Latin (these are identified in the notes). The text presented here signals scene changes and adds stage directions where appropriate.
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English landowners converted arable land to pasture for more profitable wool production (the so-called enclosure movement). Book One of Thomas More's *Utopia* underlines the brutal social results of this movement.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A decorated sleeve, a sign of the livery worn by the landlord's aggressive officers.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Appropriation (of private property).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The widespread late medieval practice of building aggressive private militias.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An elevated line of grassland forming a boundary.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A phrase effectively meaning "Bless us, Lord," the original Latin form of which has been changed through aural reception by the unlearned.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, Gib's wife.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: That is, by marrying again.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Epistle (that is, a New Testament epistle, as read in church); an expression meaning “truly.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “Our Father” (Latin); that is, the Lord’s Prayer.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: But it’s a bad idea (to give the sheep a walk).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Bad fortune on your head![Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: We are not impressed by your tricks.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The earliest church service of the day.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The original manuscript has this stage direction.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Possessions (in case Mak should steal them). The stage direction below is in the manuscript.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I (a southern dialect form). The Yorkshire shepherds speak in a northern dialect. Mak pretends to be a southerner, and of high social rank.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, drop the southern accent.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Can you now remember (who you are)?[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Road; that is, the devil is always on the move.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The money paid for a mass for her soul; that is, I wish she were dead.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “Thy hands I commend to Pontius Pilate” (Latin). A parody of Luke 23:46, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.”[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: One of the original stage directions.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A mangled form of *resurrexit a mortuis* (Latin for “he arose from the dead”), from the Apostles’ Creed.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: More mangled Latin: Judas, (in?)carnate lord.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: I'll go to the door. Half-asleep, Daw thinks he's inside.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: My heart leapt out of my skin.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Flax on my distaff (that is, demands, mouths to feed).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In a noose. Gill knows that sheep stealing is a hanging offense.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Coll and his companion are following your tracks.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: An expression of distress.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A village near Wakefield.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the ram was absent.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, sing (here badly).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, not friends, since the sun has not risen.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Do you remember the dream I recounted?[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: My season's wage is paid—my dream (that Gill was giving birth) has come to pass.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Does anything other than good vex you?[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, the sheep.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Of either sex.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: As I hope to be saved.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Proverbial.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An expression of unpleasant surprise.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Boy (although Mak evokes an alternate meaning of *knave* as "lowborn").[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Good luck and joy to him.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: May they enjoy good luck.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An allusion to a dispute among the shepherds in the author's *First Shepherds' Play*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An ill-spun fabric, indeed, always comes out badly (proverbial).[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Nature will creep where it can't walk (proverbial); that is, nature will reveal itself one way or another.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: This was an elaborate trick and a clever deception.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: What the devil shall he be called?[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, the baby is a changeling.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I stand entirely at your mercy.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, 140 pounds.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An original stage direction; "Glory [to God] in the highest" (Latin; see Luke 2:14).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A short musical note, requiring skillful control to sing.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: We must not lose the opportunity.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Behold, a virgin shall conceive (Latin; Isaiah 7:14).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: See Matthew 13:17.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: And descended (into me) before he departed (see Luke 1:28).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Let's sing loudly.[Return to reference 8](#)

Notes

- °: *farmers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *almost*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *homeless*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *may use*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fellow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *peacock*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wagon*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *glad*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by God*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *see*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *placed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splits*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dispute*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guts*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slips away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *creatures*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *field*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stub*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *had dinner*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *makes me regret*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sleep*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *play*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *haggle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly (stop)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tricks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meanwhile*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tenor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *name*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brains*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *children*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suchlike*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fancy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *act the part*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be whipped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eye*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *watch out!*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reputation*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *she*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baby*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *home*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *near*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *imagines*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *exhausted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from walking*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you keep watch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whisper together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wants*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *move fast*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in addition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *few*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aloud*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chores*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hatch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *latch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Gill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saying*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skinned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fasten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worse bargain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *get ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delivered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *deception*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(from) fasting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(God's) blessing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *causes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turns pale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nowhere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *snare*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crazy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bellies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brains*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *children*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intended*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stock*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *waning of the moon (that is, in poor light)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *work*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *an excuse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plays*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleased*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suspect*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promised*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a lullaby*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *pain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ram* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *God forbid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disgrace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thickets*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so loudly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *breathe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nose (head)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loudly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neighborhood*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enough*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *watch over*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wandered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *displeases*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suspect*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suspicion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stole*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lay down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *dwelling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *right now*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *child*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the presence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been in labor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soft*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the baby)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *totally*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grabs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *godparents*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quarrel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in accord*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take care of myself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dash in*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *child*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shame*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ill* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *acted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *day star*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cover*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evildoer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commotion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *darling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bewitched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *transformed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equipped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *again*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *advice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *quarrel*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *want*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *think*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *be angry*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gracious*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lost*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *destroy*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *promises*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Bethlehem*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *noble one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *beasts*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *voice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tell of*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *on high*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by a flash of lightning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *made*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *child*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tell*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *star*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *trilled it*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in triple rhythm*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *was missing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know how*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *long*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *joy*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *get*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hurry*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *therefore*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *learning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *who is almighty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *always*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *before (our time)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lost*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *think*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as a sign*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *announce (himself)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *eager*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *together*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *glorious one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *child*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pure*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *believe*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *born of think*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *devil*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pain*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *is merry*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *promise*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bunch*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *noble child* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flower*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *created*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *crouch*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *child*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *baby*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *head*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *day star*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *face*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *clothing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hand*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *seven days*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *utter*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *intended*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *received*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bound*[Return to reference °](#)

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIONS AND IDENTITIES

Identities take shape through exclusions: we know who we are, who counts as “us,” in part by knowing who we aren’t and against whom our group is defined. In the Middle Ages, those living under the leadership of the Western Church (headed by the pope in Rome) belonged to a powerful collective that was still in the process of formation. How could such a wide swath of people, who resided in different regions, were subjects of different secular rulers, and spoke varied languages—how could this population understand and *feel* their participation in a single community?

One solution was to focus on Christianity’s “others,” those outside the Church who helped define its boundaries. Two of the most prominent figures made to embody religious difference were the Jew and the Saracen. (“Saracen” is a pejorative term used by medieval Christians to refer to Muslims of varying ethnicities and to non-Christian Arabs.) The Jews and Saracens depicted in Western Christian culture almost never reflected the lived experiences of contemporary Jewish and Muslim people. Instead, they were complex stereotypes, constructed over time to answer the intellectual, political, emotional, and imaginative demands of Christian identity formation. Portrayals of Jewish and Saracen difference relied not only on theological doctrine but also on accounts of strange customs, racialized physiology, and geographic determinism. Such stereotyped figures of religious exclusion helped

create a Christian self-understanding powerful enough to fuel evangelism, persecution, and violence.

From its inception, Christianity both claimed Judaism and rejected it: Christians took Jesus to be the messianic savior anticipated by Jewish prophets, but they chastised and blamed Jews who did not accept the “new covenant.” They incorporated the Hebrew Bible into their own scriptures, treating it as the “Old Testament” that foretold the “New.” This stance, of incorporating the Jewish past while rejecting present Judaism, is known as “supersessionism,” and it was central to the theology and the interpretive traditions of the Western Middle Ages.

Significant numbers of Jewish people began to immigrate to England from Normandy (in what is present-day northwestern France) at the encouragement of the French-speaking Norman rulers, who came to power in England in 1066. The Normans’ new government was eager for the financial services that Jews could offer—since Christians were not permitted to lend money to other Christians at interest (a practice known pejoratively as “usury”). Surviving documents indicate that English Jews were multilingual, often writing in Hebrew, Latin, French, and English. Scholars have estimated that by the year 1200 there were probably about three thousand Jews living in England, although the number may have been as high as five thousand. All Jews had a distinctive legal status: they were “servants” of the king, rather than “subjects,” as other English people were. This status afforded them royal protection, but it also made them vulnerable to exploitative rates of taxation. Meanwhile, the Church sought to forcibly convert Jews to Christianity.

Unlegislated acts of Christian violence against Jews—throwing stones, burning homes, and massacres—took place in parallel with official policies. In some cases, Jews seem to have been caught in political disagreements between local governments and the king. Members of the nobility and gentry frequently targeted Jews to avoid paying their own debts, as in the events leading up to the massacre of Jewish residents in York in 1190. In other cases, the

justification for Christian violence was largely devotional. Preachers often repeated the claim that Jews had killed Christ, and in the twelfth century, an English monk developed a popular new falsehood, that Jews murdered Christian children (an accusation known as “blood libel”). Over the course of the thirteenth century, the persecution of the English Jewry intensified. Meir of Norwich’s poem “Put a Curse on My Enemy” offers a Jewish perspective on life amid such brutality and injustice. In the year 1290, Edward I expelled the Jews from England and confiscated their property; they were not officially readmitted until 1656. This long absence raises questions about the significance of Jews portrayed in late medieval English literature. For instance, *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* was written and performed two centuries after the expulsion. How should we understand English audiences’ ongoing craving for fictions of Judaism?

Christian imagination of Muslims, or “Saracens,” usually placed them in exoticized locales outside of Europe. Islam, a monotheistic religion that emerged in the early seventh century C.E. in what is today Saudi Arabia, is centered on the Quran, a religious text considered to be the direct word of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is considered an Abrahamic religion: all three faiths revere Abraham, an ancient Hebrew patriarch, as a holy figure in sacred history. From its inception, Islam was an evangelical and military success, spreading swiftly beyond the Arabian Peninsula. By the eighth century, the caliphate (or Muslim imperial polity) had brought Islam to territories stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to what is now Pakistan. Scientific, philosophical, and literary culture flourished in the Muslim world.

Perhaps predictably, Western Christians felt threatened by the success of Islam. That attitude assumed a new form after 1095, when Pope Urban II preached a famous sermon calling on Christians to stop fighting among themselves and instead to embark on religious war to conquer Jerusalem. (This message is repeated at the start of *The Book of John Mandeville*.) In this sermon, Urban told

exaggerated stories of Muslim violence against Christians and promised remission of sins for those who joined the cause. Eventually, tens of thousands of Europeans joined the First Crusade, whether inspired by spiritual rewards or motivated by the riches to be gained in conquest. Although the First Crusade was successful in conquering Jerusalem and establishing Crusader colonies in the Near East, these territorial gains were gradually lost. The fall of Acre (on the Mediterranean coast between modern Tel Aviv and Beirut) in 1291 marked the end of any Crusader control in the region. Nonetheless, the ideas and fantasies that had fueled the Crusades persisted. Later writers nostalgically called for a return to holy war. Two broad traditions of Islamophobic literature helped bolster such calls. One tradition mingled true facts about Islamic theology and Muhammad's life with lies, errors, and Christian propaganda. This informative, if distorted, tradition is evident in Mandeville's *Book*. The other tradition is more outlandish, with almost no true content about Islam. It portrays Saracens as idol worshippers and is often found in romances—like *The King of Tars*.

Given the centrality of Christianity to medieval western Europe, religious violence may seem inevitable. It is important to remember, however, that Europe also included regions of multifaith cohabitation, such as the Iberian Peninsula and central and eastern Europe. The Mediterranean Sea was a contact zone where merchants and pilgrims of different faiths crossed paths and relied on one another. Christian thinkers revered the classical authors of antiquity despite their apparent faith in the Greco-Roman gods. Religious difference alone did not entail hatred, and medieval Europe was far from religiously or racially homogeneous. Rather, the ideologies and fantasies that sustained religious exclusion were part of a dynamic society, one that often benefited from a strong sense of Christian identity, the hierarchical ordering of human diversity, and the violence that could result.

MAPPA MUNDI

How did medieval thinkers conceptualize the world in its entirety? One tool to do so was the *mappa mundi* (map of the world; plural, *mappae mundi*), which pictured the major land masses known to western Europeans at the time—Europe, Asia, and Africa—in a single image. More than a thousand *mappae mundi* from the Middle Ages survive. The vast majority—like the example here, found in a prayer book known as a psalter—are preserved as pictures within manuscripts. This map, known as the Psalter World Map, was made in England in the later thirteenth century. It is not quite seven inches high, and its small surface is crowded with 170 individual inscriptions. A small fraction of surviving *mappae mundi* take the form of large stand-alone documents designed for public display. For instance, the Hereford Map, created in England around 1300, is more than five feet high. It would probably have been seen on the wall at Hereford Cathedral (in western England), where church-goers could gaze on it and marvel.

Both the Psalter World Map and the Hereford Map belong to a category of cartographic representation known as “T-O maps.” In maps of this kind, the habitable portion of the world is depicted as a circle, an O, divided into three regions by the T representing the Mediterranean Sea. The crossbars of the structuring T intersect at the center of the map, and it is here that Jerusalem is found, the most important place in Christian sacred history, where Jesus was crucified and resurrected. T-O maps became more prevalent following the Crusades, when the spiritual urgency of conquering the

Holy Land helped unite and mobilize Western Christendom. Jerusalem was both ideologically and geographically central.

The three territories divided by the Mediterranean's T represent Europe, Asia, and Africa. Since the map is oriented with east at the top, Asia appears there, constituting the largest land mass. Asia was thought to be the home of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who lived in the earthly paradise. Paradise appears on the Psalter World Map directly beneath the figure of Christ, who stands outside the created world and presides over it. The divine figure looks enormous, on a completely different scale from earthly places, and even holds a small T-O sphere in his hand, which mirrors and miniaturizes the globe below. Europe appears on the bottom left of the map (the northwest), and Africa is on the bottom right (southwest). Britain shows up as only a minor and marginal detail, crowded near the edge of the world. Across the map, on the southwest coast of Africa, fourteen tiny figures appear, each characterized by a monstrous feature: one is eating human flesh; another is headless, with eyes in its shoulders; one lacks ears; another has no nose. These represent the remote, semi-human races that had been described in classical antiquity and continued to fascinate medieval audiences. They are detailed in *The Book of John Mandeville*. In both the *mappa mundi* and *Mandeville*, we can recognize how European thinkers projected their fantasies and anxieties about the limits of the human onto remote geographies and peoples.

While the map seems to portray the earth as flat, in fact educated people throughout the Middle Ages understood it to be spherical. The continents that make up the T-O actually represent just the Northern Hemisphere, sometimes thought to be the only inhabitable part of the globe. Those making and using medieval maps understood the *mappa mundi* to offer only a schematic representation of a more complex geographic reality. A map like the Psalter World Map would have been used not for navigation but rather for contemplating the organization and the diversity of the divinely governed world.

left (northwest); Africa, the bottom right (southwest). Jerusalem is at the center. Not even 7 inches high, this map contains 170 individual inscriptions. See also the color insert in this volume.

MEIR OF NORWICH (MEIR BEN ELIJAH)

fl. late thirteenth century

Meir of Norwich's poems, surviving in a single manuscript, testify to a powerful Anglo-Jewish poetic voice. What we know about Meir comes exclusively from his poetry, which includes more than twenty *piyyutim*, or Jewish liturgical poems written in Hebrew, which he composed in the later thirteenth century. His long poem on the Exodus—the episode in Jewish sacred history when the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt—contains an identifying acrostic, a message spelled out by letters in sequential lines of poetry. The acrostic reads, "I am Meir, son of Rabbi Elijah from the city of Norgitz [Norwich], which is in the Isle called Angleterre [England]." Meir's poetry is dense with allusions to the Hebrew Bible, and it indicates dynamic textual exchange with Jewish communities on the Iberian Peninsula and in northern Europe.

Norwich was an important trading center in medieval England, and at its peak the city's medieval Jewish population probably numbered about two hundred people. By the thirteenth century, however, Norwich Jews faced intensified persecution. False accusations against them, attacks, the burning of Jewish houses, mass arrests, and executions became increasingly common from the 1230s onward. Norwich was also the setting for a particularly harmful piece of anti-Jewish propaganda. In 1150, the monk Thomas of Monmouth began circulating the false narrative that a

boy named William, who had been murdered six years earlier, was killed by Norwich Jews in an act of human sacrifice. In his sensationalistic and factually untrue account, Thomas portrays the death of the twelve-year-old William in terms borrowed directly from Jesus's crucifixion. The story is an example of how representations of Christian victimization could be weaponized: sympathy for a child's pain is made into a reason to persecute Jews. Thomas's *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich* is the first known medieval accusation of Jewish ritual murder. The text was wildly popular, and the grotesque allegation became central to medieval ideologies of anti-Judaism. By the time of the expulsion of 1290—when King Edward I forced the entirety of Anglo-Jewry out of England and confiscated their property—only fifty to sixty Jews were still living in Norwich.

Meir's poem "Put a Curse on My Enemy" is a lyrical response to persecution. In the surviving manuscript, it bears a heading indicating that it is about "the heaviness of exile, the slayings in prison, and financial ruin." These are likely to have been personal experiences for Meir's family and neighbors in the late thirteenth century. The poem's refrain centers on divine light and its contrast to the present darkness. The speaker seems to veer tumultuously from hope to despair, from fury to resolve. Nearly every line echoes a verse of the Hebrew Bible (only some of these allusions are pointed out in the footnotes below). The poem—now known by its first line, "Put a curse on my enemy"—is composed of hemistichs, or half-lines, of six or seven syllables apiece. In the Modern English translation below, most half-lines of Hebrew have been translated into a full line. Here is the beginning of the poem in Hebrew (to be read from right to left):

אוֹיְבִי בְּמַאֲרָה תִּקֵּב, כִּי כָּל אֶחָד עָקוֹב יֵעָקֵב,
מִתִּי תֹאמַר לְבַיִת יֵעָקֵב לָכֵן וְנִלְכָּה בְּאוֹר.
אֲדִיר אֶתָּה וְנֹאֹר, מִחֲשָׁכִים תִּסּוּבֵב לְאוֹר.

Put a Curse on My Enemy¹

Put a curse on my enemy, for every man supplants
his brother.

When will You say to the house of Jacob, come let us
walk in the light?²

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*³

Tear out their hearts—they who brought harm to
those who come in Your Name

5 When I hoped for good, evil arrived, yet I will wait
for the light.⁴

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

The words of the seer are garbled, for the foe has
mocked Your children

Until they don't know which path is the one that
gives off light.

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

10 The land exhausts us by demanding payments, and
the people's disgust is heard

While we are silent and wait for the light.

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

They make our yoke heavier, they are finishing us
off.

They continually say of us, let us despoil them until
the morning light.

15 *You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

Let their victory spatter Your garment, for Your
beloved's heart is distressed
But she will be consoled for this; her lord will remain
until light.

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

20 Have You forgotten to be gracious, My God?⁵ When
will You gather in the camps,
Scattered to the corners [of the earth], like infants
that have not seen the light?

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

Let the King bring home His banished one, let Him
smell his savory offering.

The foes who make his savor stink will never see the
light.

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

25 And if You have continued to afflict him [Israel], be
abundantly merciful, be gracious to him.
For he has despaired of [returning to] his dwelling,
and of Your ways of radiant light.

*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

The vision of His intimates tarries; the predicted time
has passed.

Let their [the enemies'] hold on us weaken, one and
all, until the light [dawns].

30 *You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

If his vision shall be hidden, with no interpreter for
his dreams,⁶

Why should the glory of the crown remain with the filthy one until the light [comes]?

You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.

Even if his [Israel's] sins have really enraged [You], why should his foes wage war [against him]?

35 They whose mouths have spoken arrogantly, they are rebels against the light.

You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.

They scattered him with their horns,⁷ but he hoped in hidden prophecies

For the men of visions have sealed [themselves] up and do not know the light.

You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.

40 Malicious men have cast down his crown, and presumed to annihilate him.

They put him in prison, where in twilight he hoped for the light.

You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.

Bring near his End to raise him up, before he is lost in his exile,

For they have boasted to annihilate him; they mistake the darkness for light.

45 *You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.*

All his days, he [Israel] has surely hoped; day after day [he awaits] consolation.

O Awesome and Mighty One in Heaven, who brings His justice into the light⁸

You are mighty and full of light. You turn the darkness into light.

50 If You have given me unto my enemy, rise up to
plead my cause.⁹
Establish the Messiah's reign, [so that] light will be
seen in Your light.¹
*You are mighty and full of light. You turn the
darkness into light.*

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is by Susan L. Einbinder, from *Journal of Medieval History* 26.2 (2000): 145–62.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Isaiah 2:5. Jacob is regarded as one of the patriarchs, or ancestral leaders, of the Jewish people.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Isaiah 42:16.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Job 30:26.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Psalm 77:10 (in Protestant Bibles, 77:9).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: See Genesis 40:8.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Zechariah 2:1–2 (in Protestant Bibles, 1:18–19). In Zechariah's prophetic vision, horns symbolize forces hostile to the Jewish people.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: See Zephaniah 3:5.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: See Psalm 74:22.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Psalm 36:10 (in Protestant Bibles, 36:9).[Return to reference 1](#)

THE KING OF TARS

Upward of sixty or so romances (as defined above, [pp. 141–42](#)) survive in Middle English, across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These are for the most part examples of popular literature, with all the standard characteristics of popular appeal. That is, such romances often lack the following: stylistic density; an implied authorial perspective; explicit ethical complexity; resistance to narrative closure; a self-conscious sense of literary tradition, which itself produces a philological interest in preserving a textual tradition; a named patron; a named author; and historical specificity. Instead, they offer simplistic emotional gestures (for example, extreme anger, passionate desire), “happy” endings, and contrastive cultural oppositions that are stark and often wildly incorrect.

The early fourteenth-century romance *The King of Tars* is nothing if not an example of popular literature. Its style is simple, its narrative presented in the chiaroscuro cultural oppositions characteristic of cartoons (here, good Christians and bad Muslims). Examples of wild carelessness with historical culture in *The King of Tars* include the representation of Islam as polytheistic and the juxtaposition of Tharsia (“Tars”), an imagined Christian kingdom bordering China, and Damascus (“Damas”). What counts is contrast, not correctness.

One of the principal functions of romances, however, is to cement alliances across deep oppositions. Romances explore the boundaries of a given culture as they strengthen it through alliances across those boundaries. Does *The King of Tars* do this?

On the face of it, initially, not at all: Christian–Muslim relations are characterized by outright aggression and military confrontation. The marriage between the Christian princess and the sultan, agreed to under duress, is a reflex of that unequivocal hostility. Whereas marriage is normally the culmination of a romance plot, here it occurs midnarrative and promises only more abrasive confrontation. Indeed, so deep is the cultural cleavage that it is manifest in seemingly permanent physiological categories. The cultural conversions and the sacramental rites that confirm them do effect a crossing of cultural boundaries for this couple and their child. But the reality of biological difference (including skin color) between believers of different faiths in fact reaffirms the bristling hostilities and profound sense of difference that divide faith groups. A violent end awaits anyone who resists the new, body-altering dispensation.

For partial analogues to *The King of Tars*, see the narrative of Constance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* 2.587–1612, in which marriage is similarly a metaphor for geographical, historical, and religious synergies. In those two works, the Christian princess Constance effectively traces the boundaries of Christendom through her marriages—first, and unsuccessfully, to a Muslim sultan of Syria and then, successfully, to a Northumbrian king.

The verse form consists of twelve-line stanzas, arranged in four groupings of three lines: a rhyming couplet in four-stress lines followed by one three-stress line. The rhyme scheme is *a a b a a b c c b d d b*.

The King of Tars¹

Harkneth to me both old and ying,^o
For Marie's^o love, that swete thing,
All how a war began
Between a true Christian king
And an heathen high^o lording,
5 Of Damas^o the sultan.
The king of Tars² had a wive,
Fairer might none been alive—
That any wight^o telle can.
A daughter they had them between,
10 None fairer woman might been—
As white as feather of swan.

The maiden was chaste and blithe of cheer^o
With rode^o red as blossom on briar
And eighen stepe^o and gray.
15 With lowe shoulders and white swere^o
Her for to see was great prayer^o
Of princes proud in play.
The los^o of her gan springe wide
In other landes by each a side,
20 So the sultan heard it say.
Him thought his heart it burst ofive^o
But if^o he might have her to wive
That was so fair a may.^o

His messengers he gan calle
25 And bad them wightly wenden^o alle
To her father the king,
And said he would, how so^o it befalle,
His daughter clothe in riche palle^o

30 And spouse^o her with his ring;
And if he nold,^o withouten fail,
He would her win in bataille
With many an high lording.
The messengers forth they went
35 To do the sultan's commandment
Withouten any dwelling.^o

Then the king of Tars this understood
Almost for wrath he wex^o near wood^o
And said thus in sawe:^o
40 "By Him that died on the rode,^o
I would erst^o spill min heart blood
In battle to ben yslawe.^o
I nold^o her give a Saracen^o
For alle the land that is mine.
The devil him erst to drawe,^o
45 But^o she will with her gode wille
Be wedded to him, herself to spille.^o
Her thoughtes not I no knawe,^o

"Ac^o I shall wite^o er than^o ye pass."
His daughter anon was brought in place
50 And he asked her bilive.^o
"Daughter, the sultan of Damas
Yearns for to see thy face
And would thee have to wive.
Wouldest thou, daughter, for treasure
55 Forsake Jesus our Saviour
That suffered woundes five?"
The maiden answered with mild mod^o
Before her father there she stood
60 "Nay, lord, so mot I thrive!^o
"Jesus my Lord in Trinity
Let me never that day ysee

A tyrant for to take.
 O God and Persons Three in One
 For Marie love, Thy mother free,^o
 65 Give him erst tene and wrake."^o
 The king said, "Daughter, be stille.
 Thou shalt never be wedded him tille^o
 For no boast he can make.
 I shall him sende word again
 70 That alle his thoughts been in vain,
 For thou hast him forsake."

 Right by the same messengers
 That came from the sultan fierce
 These wordes he him sent:
 75 That she believed not on his manners,
 She nold not leten^o her prayers
 To God omnipotent.
 He bade him take another thought,
 For of his daughter no tit him naught³
 80 For treasure nor for rent.
 The messengers heard him thus sayen;
 With that word they turned again
 And to the sultan they went.

 As the sultan sat at his dais,
 85 Yserved of the first mes,^o
 They came into the hall.
 Before those princes proud in press^o
 Their tale to tell withouten les^o
 On knees they gan doun fall.
 90 They said, "Sir, the king of Tars
 Of wicked wordes is nought scarce.
 'Heathen hound' he gan thee call;
 And er^o he give his daughter thee tille,^o
 Thine heart blood he will spille,
 95 And thine barons alle."

When the sultan these wordes heard
 Also^o a wilde boar he ferd.^o
 His robe he rent adown;
 His hair he rent of head and beard;
 100 He should avenge him with his sword,
 He swore by Seyn Mahoun.^o
 The table so hetelich^o he smot^o
 It fell in to the floor fot-hot^o
 And loked as a lion.
 105 All that he reached, he smote down right—
 Sergeant, squire, clerk, and knight,
 Both earl and baron.

 Al thus the sultan fared, yplight;^o
 All that day and alle that night
 110 No man might him chaste.^o
 Amorrow when it was light,
 His messengers he sent full right
 For his barons well fast
 That they came to his parliament
 115 Forto hear his judgment,
 Both least and most.^o
 When the parliament was pleyner,^o
 Then bespoke the sultan fer^o
 And said to them in haste:
 120
 “Lordings,” he said, “what to red?^o
 Me hath been don a great misdeed
 Of Tars the Christian king!
 I bede^o him bothe land and lede^o
 125 For his daughter worthliche in wede^o
 To have wed her with ring,
 And he me sent word again
 In battle I should erst^o be slain
 And many a high lording!

130 And certes^o he shall be forsworn.^o
Wrotherhele than was he been⁴
But^o I thereto it bring.
"And therefore I have after you sent
And assembled here this parliament
To wite^o your conseyl."^o
135 And all they said with good entent
They were at his commandment,
Certain withouten fail.
Right by that day a fourtenight
They shall be all ready dight^o
140 With helm, hauberk^o of mail.
And when they were so at his hest^o
The sultan made a riche feast
For love of his bateyle.^o

145 The sultan gathered a rout unride^o
Of Saracens of michel^o pride
Upon the king to wende.^o
The king of Tars heard that tide;^o
He gathered his host by each a side,
All that he might ofsende.
150 Then began wrathe to wake
For that marriage might not take
Of that maiden hende.^o
Of battle they gan set a day,
Of Seynt Eleyne the third in May,
155 No longer no wald they lende.^o

The sultan came with his power
With bright armor and broad banner,
Into the field to fight
With sixty thousand Saracens fer,^o
160 That all the feldes far and near
With helmes lemed^o light.
The king of Tars came with his host,

With great pride and michel boast,
With many an hardy knight,
165 And either host^o gan other assail.
There might men see a strong bateyle
That grimly was of sight.

There hew^o houndes^o on Christian men
And felled them down by nine and ten;
170 So wild they were and wode^o
That men might see alle the fen^o
Of Christian both fremd and ken,^o
The valleys ran on blood.

The sultan and his folk that stounde^o
175 Hewe adown with grimly wounde
Many a frely rode.^o

Allas, too well sped Mahoun!^o
The Christian men yede al adown^o
Was not^o that them withstode.
180 The king of Tars saw that sight;
For wrath he was nigh wode,^o aplight.^o

He hent^o in hand a spear
And to the sultan he rode full right.
With a stroke of michel^o might,
185 To ground he gan him bear.^o
There he had^o the sultan slawe^o
Ac^o ten thousand of heathen lawe^o
Saved him in that war—

They set him on a full good steed
190 That was so good at every need
That no man might him dere.^o

And when he was upon his stede,
Him thought he burned so spark on glede^o
For ire and for envy.
195 He fought so he would wede:^o
All that he hit he made bleed.

“Help, Mahoun!” he gan cry.
Many helm there was ofweved^o
And many bacinet^o tocleaved
200 And saddles fell empty;
Many sword and many shield
And many knight lay in the field
Of Christian company.

The king of Tars saw him so ride
205 He flew^o and dared not abide
Homeward to his city
The Saracens followed in that tide^o
And slew adown by each a side
That Christian folk so fre.^o
210 Thirty thousand there were yslawe^o
Of knights of Christian lawe
And that was great pity.
Amorrown for their bother sake^o
Truce they gan between them take
215 A month and dayes three.

On a day, the king sat in his hall
And made grete diol^o with all,
For his folk were forlore.^o
His daughter came clad in pall^o
220 Adown on knees she gan to fall
And said with sighing sore,
Sir, let me be the sultan’s wife
And rear no more cuntek^o nor strife
As hath been here before.
225 For me hath many man been schent,^o
Cités nomen^o and townes brent;^o
Allas that I was bore!^o
Father, I will serve at will
The sultan, bothe loude and still,^o
230 And leve^o on God almight,

But^o it so be, he shall thee spille^o
 And all thy land take him tille^o
 With battle and with fight.
 Certes^o I nil^o no longer dreye^o
 235 That Christian folk for me die—
 It were a dolful^o sight!"
 The king of Tars answered tho,^o
 As man that was in sorrow and woe,
 Unto that bird^o bright:
 240
 "Now daughter, blessed may thou be
 Of Jesus Christ in Trinity
 The time that thou were bore.^o
 For thou wilt save thy mother and me,
 All thy prayer^o grant I thee,
 245 As thow hast said before."
 "Father," she said withouten dwelling,^o
 For Jesus' love, Heaven king,
 If it thy wille were,
 Do now swithe^o that I were there
 250 Er^o any more sorrow arere^o
 That ye be not forlore."^o

 The king of Tars with good entent
 Hastily after his wife he sent,
 That lady that was so hende.^o
 255 When she was come in present
 He said, "Dame, our daughter hath ment^o
 To the sultan to wende.^o
 Do loke what rede is now at thee,⁵
 For now are here but we three
 260 To save Christian kinde."
 The queen answered withoute fail
 "I no shall never thereto conseil^o
 Our daughter for to schende."^o

265 The maiden was full of sorrow and woe.
"Mercy," she cried her mother tho_o
With a well rueful steven._o
"Mother, it is not long ago
For me were slawe_o knightes thro,_o
Thirty thousand and seven.
270 Forthy_o I will suffer no longer thrawe_o
That Christian folk be for me slawe,
With the grace of God in Heaven."
Thus, the maiden with wordes stille_o
Brought them both in better wille
275 With reason right and even.

And when they were thus at one,
Messengers they sent anon
Unto that riche sultan,
To make his friend that were his fon;_o
280 And for he should his men not slou,_o
His daughter he grant him than._o
The messengers nold_o no long abide;
To the sultan they went that tide
And thus they tell him gan.
285 When those letters weren yredde,_o
The sultan was both blithe and glad,
And so was many a man.

So glad he was in all manners
He cleped_o to him of his peers
290 Dukes, princes, and kings.
Into a chamber they went yfers_o
To dight_o unto the messengers
Good stones and riche rings.
By conseil of the lordings all,
295 The sultan did bring into the hall
Gifts and riche things,

And gave to them great plenty,
To the messengers, with heart free
And thanked them their tidings.

300

And said he was alle at his wille,
Early and late, loud and stille,
To help him at his need;
No more folk ne would he spille.^o
The messengers went the king tille^o
And told him of that deed.

305

The king and the queen also
Both them^o was wele^o and woe,
In rhyme also^o we read.
Great joy they had withoute les^o
For that the sultan would have peace
On Christian felawerede.^o

310

The first day of July tide,
The sultan ne would no long abide;
To the king of Tars he sent
Knights fele^o and michel pride^o
And riche jewells is not to hide
To give to^o his present.
The messengers, withoute dwelling,^o
Came to Tars before the king
To have his daughter gent.^o
They welcomed them with glad cheer—
Of great pity now may ye hear—
To chamber when they went.

315

320

They made cry and michel^o woe
For they should their daughter forgo
And to the sultan her send.
The maiden prayed them both tho^o
That they should by their conseil do,
To saven Christian kinde.

325

330 "For I will suffer no longer thrawe^o
That Christian folk be for me slawe."^o
To hall they gan wende^o
And welcomed those messengers
That came from the sultan fierce
335 With wordes free and hende.^o

Then said the queen to them than,^o
"How fareth your lord, the sultan,
That is so noble a knight?"
The messengers answered gan
340 "He farth as well as any man,
And is your friend aplight."^o
The queen said with milde cheer,
"Well better though^o my daughter were,
By Jesus full of might.
345 My daughter is not to him too good;
I vouchesafe on him my blood,
Though she were ten^o so bright."

The messengers dight^o them swithe^o
With knightes fele^o and stedes stithe^o
350 And brought her into chare.^o
The king and the queen were unblithe,^o
Their sorrow couth they no man kithe^o
When they saw her forth fare.^o
Into chamber they went tho^o
355 When they were together bothe two
Then wakened alle their care.^o

The kinge was in sorrow bound;
The queen swooned many a stound^o
For their daughter dear.
360 Knights and ladies there them found
And took them up whole and sound,
And comfort them in fere.^o

Thus the queen and the king
Lived in sorrow and care, mourning;
365 Great dole^o it was to hear.
Their care^o was ever alike newe,
Them changed both hide and hewe⁶
For sorrow and reweli chere.^o

Now let we been^o all their mourning,
370 And tell we of that maiden ying^o
That to the sultan is fare.^o
He came with many great lording
Forto welcome that sweete thing
When she was brought in chare.^o
375 He kissed her well many a sithe;^o
His joye couth^o he no man kithe^o—
Away was all his care.
Into chamber she was ladde,
And richely she was cladde
380 As heathen woman were.

When she was clad in riche pall,^o
The sultan did his knightes call
And bad^o that maiden forth fet.^o
And when she came into the hall,
385 Before the high lordinges all,
Tofore the sultan they her set.
Great dole^o it was for to see,
The bird^o that was so bright on ble^o
To have so foul a mett.^o
390 Though that she made great solas^o
The sorrow that at her heart was
No might it noman let.⁷

And when it was come to night,
The lady that was so fair and bright,
395 To chamber she gan wende.^o

And therein anon I you plight,^o
 A riche bed there was ydight^o
 Unto that lady hende.^o
 The lady was to bed ybrought;
 400 The sultan wild came therein nought
 Neither for foe nor friend—
 For nothing would he neighe^o that may^o
 Till that she leved^o upon his lay,^o
 405 That^o was of Christian kende.^o

Well loathe war^o a Christian man
 To wedde an heathen woman
 That leved^o on fals lawe;
 Als^o loath was that sultan
 To wed a Christian woman,
 410 As I find in my sawe.^o
 The sultan yede^o to bed al priest,^o
 Knights and ladies yede to rest;
 The people them gan withdrawe.
 That miri^o maiden little slepe,
 415 But all night well sore she wepe
 Till the day gan dawe.^o

And as she fell on slepe thore^o
 Her thought there stood her before
 An hundred houndes blake,^o
 420 And bark on^o her lesse and more.
 And one there was that grieved^o her sore,^o
 Away that would her take.
 And she no durst^o him not smite^o
 For dread that he would her bite,
 425 Such maistri^o he gan to make.
 And as she would from them flee,
 She saw there stand devils three
 And each brent^o as a drake.^o

430 So lothliche^o they were al ywrought,^o
And each in hand a gleive^o brought,
She was aferd^o full sore.
On Jhesu Christ was alle her thought;
Therefore the fendes^o derd^o her nought;
Neither lesse nor more.
435 Fro the fendes she passed sounde,
And afterward there came an hounde
With browes broad and hore.^o
Almost he hadde her drawen adoun
Ac^o through Jhesus Christes passioun^o
440 She was ysaved thore.^o

Yet her thought withouten lesing^o
Als^o she lay in her swevening^o
(That selcouthe^o was to rede)
That black hound her was following.
445 Through might of Jhesu, Heven king,
Spac^o to her in manhede^o
In white clothes als a knight,
And said to her, "My swete wight,^o
No tharf thee nothing drede⁸
450 Of Ternagaunt no of Mahoun.⁹
Thy Lord that suffred passioun
Shall help thee at thy nede."

And when the maiden was awaked,
For drede of that, well sore she quaked,
455 For love of her swevening.^o
On her bed she sat al naked;
To Jhesu her prayer she maked,
Almightful Heven king.
As wis^o as He her dere bought^o
460 Of that swevening in sleep she thought
Should turn to good ending.

And when the maiden risen was
 The riche sultan of Damas
 To his temple he gan her bring.
 465

Then said the sultan to that may,^o
 "Thou must believe upon my lay^o
 And kneel now here adown
 And forsake thy false lay
 That thou hast leved^o on many a day,
 470 And honor Seyn Mahoun!^o
 And certes, but thou^o wilt anon,
 Thy father I shall with war slon^o
 By Jovin and Plotoun!¹
 And by Mahoun and Ternagant
 475 There shall no man ben his waraunt²—
 Emperour nor king with croun."
 The maiden answered with mild chere^o
 To the sultan as ye may hear:
 "Sir, I nil^o thee nought grieve.
 480 Teach me now and let me hear
 How I shall make my preiere
 When ich^o on them believe.
 To Mahoun ichil^o me take
 And Jhesu Christ my Lord forsake,
 485 That made Adam and Eve,
 And sithen^o serve thee at wille
 Arliche^o and late, loude and stille,
 A morwe and an eve."

Then was the sultan glad and blithe,
 490 And thanked Mahoun many sithe^o
 That she was so biknawe.^o
 His joy couthe he no man kithe;^o
 He bad^o her go and kisse swithe^o
 Alle thine godes on rawe.^o
 495 She kissed Mahoun and Apolin,

Astirof and Sir Jovin.³

For dread of wordes awe,^o
And while she was in the temple
Of Ternagant and Jupiter,
500 She learned the heathen lawe.
And though she all the lawes couthe^o
And said them openliche with her mouthe,
Jhesu forgot she nought.
Where that she was, by north or southe,
505 No minstrel with harp no crouthe^o
No might change her thought.
The sultan wende^o night and day
That she hadde leved^o upon his lay^o
But al he was bicought,^o
510 For when she was by herselfen,
To Jhesu she made her mon,^o
That alle this world hath wrought.

The sultan dede cry^o that tide^o
Overal by each a side
515 A tournament to take
And doughty men on horse to ride,
And dubbed them in that tide
And knightes gan he make.
The trumpes gun forto blowe;
520 Knightes priked^o out o rowe^o
On stedes white and blake.
There might men see sone and swithe,^o
Strong men their strengthe kithe^o
For that maiden sake.

525
The Christian maiden and the sultan
In the castle leyen^o than^o
The tournament to behold.
And tho^o the tournament began,
Ther was samned^o many a man

530 Of Saracens stout and bold.
To see there was a seemly sight
Of thirty thousand of helmes bright
(In gest^o as it is told).
535 They leyden on as they were wrothe
With swerdes and with maces bothe
Knightes bothe yong and old.

Well many helme ther was ofweved^o
And many bacinet tocleved^o
And knightes driven to grounde.
540 Some there fell down on their heved^o
And some in the diche lay todreved^o
And siked^o sore unsounde.
The tournament last tho yplight^o
From the morwe to the night
545 Of men of michel mounde;^o
Amorwe^o the sultan wedded that may^o
In the manner of his lay,^o
In gest^o as it is founde.
At his bridal was noble fest,
550 Riche, royal, and honest^o—
Doukes, kinges with croun.
For there was melody with the mest^o
Of harp and fiddle and of gest^o
To lordinges of renoun.
555 There was geven to the minstrels
Robes riche and many jewels
Of earl and of baroun.
The feast lasted fourtenight^o
With mete and drink enough, aflight^o
560 Plenté and great foisoun.^o

That levedi,^o so fair and so free,^o
Was with her lord but monethes three^o
Then he gat her with childe.

565 When it was geten, she chaunged ble;°
The sultan himself that gan see—
Jolif° he was and wilde.°
There while she was with child, aflight,
She bad° to Jhesu ful of might
570 From shame He should her schilde.°
Atte forty weekes ende
The levedi was deliverd o bende°
Through help of Mary milde.

And when the child was ybore,
Well sorry women were therefore,
575 For limb no had it none,
But as a rond° of flesh yschore°
In chamber it lay them before
Withouten blood and bone.
For sorwe the levedi would die,
580 For it had neither nose nor eye
But lay dead as the stone.
The sultan came to chamber that tide
And with his wife he gan to chide
That woe was her begon.°

585 "O dame," he said befor,°
"Again° my godes thou art forsworn!
With right resoun I preve°
The childe that is here of thee born
Bothe limb and lith° it is forlorn
590 Al through thy false believe!
Thou levest nought wele afine°
On Jubiter no on Apoline,
A morwe na an eve,
No in Mahoun no in Ternagant.
595 Therefore is lorn° this little faunt.°
No wonder though me grieve!"
The levedi° answerd and said tho,°

There she lay in care and woe,
"Leve^o sir, let be that thought;
600 The child was geten^o between us two.
For thy believe^o it farth^o so,
By Him that us hath wrought!
Take now this flesh and bear it anon
Before thine godes everichon
605 That thou no lete it nought,^o
And pray thine godes all yfere,^o
Astow^o art them^o leve^o and dere,
To live^o that it be brought.

"And if Mahoun and Jovin can
610 Make it formed after^o a man
With life and limbs aright,
By Jhesu Christ that this world wan^o
I shall leve^o thee better than^o
That they are full of might.
615 And but^o they it to live bring
I nil leven^o on them nothing
Neither by day no night."
The sultan took that flesh anon
Into his temple he gan to gon^o
620 There his godes were dight.^o

Beorn his goddes he gan it leyn^o
And held up his honden twain,^o
While men might go five mile.
"A, mightful Mahoun," he gan to seyn,
625 "And Ternagaunt, of michel meyn,^o
In you was never no guile.
Seyn^o Jubiter and Apolin,
Astirot and Seyn Jovin,
Help now in this perile."
630 Oft he kneeled and oft he ros^o
And cried so long till he was hos^o

And al he tint^o his while._o

635 And when he hadde al ypreyd,
And alle that ever he couth^o he said,
The flesh lay still as stone.
Anon he stert up at a breyd,_o
And in his hert he was atreyd,_o
For limb no had it none.

640 He beheld on his godes alle
And saw there might no bot^o befall;
Well woe was him begon.⁴
"O Sir Mahoun," he gan to grede,_o
"Will ye nought help me at this nede?
645 The devil you brenne^o echon^o!"

He hent^o a staff with grete hete^o
And stirt^o anon his godes to beat
And drough^o them alle adoun,
And leyd on til he gan to sweat
And gaf them strokes gode and great,
650 Both Jovine and Plotoun.
And alder best he beat afín^o
Jubiter and Apolin,
And broke them arm and croun,_o
And Ternagaunt that was their brother—
655 He no let never a limb with other⁵
Nor of his god Mahoun.

And when he hadde beaten them gode won^o
Yet lay the flesh stille so ston,_o
On high on his altar.
660 He took it in his hand anon
And into chamber he gan gon,
And said, "Lo, have it here.
I have don all that I can
To make it formed after^o a man

665 With kneeling and prayer,
And for alle that ichave^o them besought
Mine godes no may help me nought.
The devil them sett afere!"⁶

670 And then answered that good woman
Well hendeliche^o to that sultan:
"Leve^o sir, hear my speech.
The best rede^o that I can,
By Jhesu Christ that made man,
Now ichil^o you teach.
675 Now thou hast proved^o god thine,
Gif me leave^o to assay^o mine
Whether is better leech.^o
And, leve sir, pray thee this:
Leve on Him that stronger is
680 For doute of^o more wreche."^o

The sultan answered her thore.^o
In heart he was aggrieved sore,
To see that selcouthe^o sight.
"Now, dame, ichil^o do by thy lore.^o
685 If that I may see before
Thy God is of swiche^o might
With any virtue that He can
Make it formed after a man,
With life and limbs aright,
690 Alle my godes ichil forsake
And to Jhesu thy Lord me take,
As icham^o gentil^o knight."

Well blithe was the levedi^o than^o
For that her lord the riche sultan
695 Had graunted her prayer.
For hope he should be Christian man,
She thanked Him that this world wan^o

And Mary His mother dear.
 Now ginneth here a merry pas_o
 700 How that child ychristned_o was
 With limbs al whole and fere,_o
 And how the sultan of Damas
 Was christned for that ich cas_o—
 Now herken_o and ye may hear.
 705
 Then said the levedi in that stounde,_o
 "Thou hast in thy prisoun bounde
 Many a Christian man.
 Do seche_o overalle by loft and grounde;_o
 If any Christian priest be founde,
 710 Bring him before me than_o
 And I shall er_o tomorwe at none_o
 Wite_o what Jhesu Christ can done
 More than thine maumettes_o can."
 Anon the prisouns weren ysought;
 715 They found a priest and forth him brought
 By hest_o of that sultan.

 He came before that levedi free,_o
 And gret_o her fair upon his knee,
 And said with sikeing_o sore,
 720 "Madame, yblessed mot_o thou be
 Of Jhesu Christ in Trinity
 That of Mary was bore."_o
 The levedi said, "Artow_o a priest?
 Tell me sothe if that thow best._o
 725 Canstow_o of Christian lore?"
 "Madame," said the priest anon,
 "In verbo De_o ich was on,_o
 Twenty winter gon_o and more.

 730 "Ac_o dame," he said, "by Seyn John,
 Ten winter song_o I masse none

And that me liketh ille.^o
For so long it is now gon
Ichave^o been in thy prison of stone
With wrong and great unskille."^o
735 The levedi said, "Let be thy fare.^o
Thou shalt be brought out of thy care
And^o thou wilt hold thee stille.
For through thine help in this stounde,^o
740 We shall make Christian men of houndes—
God grant it if it be His wille."

Then said the sultan's wife,
"Thou must do still^o withouten strife
A well great privy.
Holy water thou must make,
745 And this ich^o flesh thou take,
All for the love of me,
And christen^o it withouten blame
In the worship of the Father's name
That sit in Trinity.^z
750

"For in Him is mine hope aflight,^o
The Father that is full of might
My sorwe shall me slake.^o
If it were christned aright,
It should have form to see by sight
755 With limb and life to wake."
That levedi^o command^o anon
Her maidens out of chamber gon
For dread of wraying sake.⁸
The priest no long^o nold abide;
760 A fair vessel he took that tide
And holy water he gan make.

At midsummer tide^o that deed was don
Through help of God that sit in throne,

765 As I you telle may.
 The priest took the flesh anon
 And cleped^o it the name of John
 In worship of the day.
 And when that it christned was
 It hadde life and limb and fas^o
 770 And cried with great deray,^o
 And hadde hide and flesh and fel^o
 And alle that ever therto befell,
 In gest^o as I you say.

775 Fairer child might non be bore^o—
 It no had never a limb forlore,^o
 Well shapen it was, withalle;
 The priest no longe dwelled thore^o
 And yede^o and told the sultan fore^o
 There he was in the halle.
 780 That levedi^o there she lay in bed
 That richeliche was bischred^o
 With gold and purple palle.^o
 The child she take to her blive^o
 And thanked our levedi with joyes five
 785 The fair grace there was befall.

And said, "Lord, I pray Thee,
 Almighty God in Trinity,
 So give me might and space
 That I may that day ysee
 790 My lord would ychristned^o be,
 The sultan of Damas."
 Then came the sultan that was black,
 And she showed him the child and spac^o
 With life and limbs and face.
 795 She said, "Mahoun no Apolin
 Is nought worth the bristle of a swin^o
 Again^o my Lordes grace!"

The sultan said, "Leman min,^o
 Ywis icham^o glad afín^o
 800 Of this child that I see."
 "Ya, sir, by Seyn^o Martin
 If the halvendel^o were thin^o
 Well glad might thou be."
 "O dame," he said, "how is that?
 805 Is it nought mine that I begat?"
 "No, sir," then said she,
 "But thou were christned^o so it is—
 Thou no hast no part thereon ywis,^o
 Neither of the child ne of me.
 810
 "And but thou^o wilt Mahoun forsake
 And to Jhesu my Lord thee take,
 That tholed^o woundes five—
 Anon thou do thee Christian make—
 Thou might be ferd^o for sorwe and wrake^o
 815 While that thou art alive.
 And if thou were a Christian man
 Bothe weren thine," she said than,^o
 "Thy childe and eke^o thy wive.
 When thou art dead, thou shalt wende
 820 Into bliss withouten ende,
 Thy joie may no man kithe."^o

 The sultan saw well by sight
 That Jhesu was of more might
 Than was his false lawe.
 825 He said, "Dame, anon right^o
 Ichil^o forsake my gods aplight^o—
 They shall be brent and drawe.^o

 Ac^o telle me now par charité,^o
 And for the love thou has to me,
 830

What shall I seyn in sawe?°
Now ichave° forsaken my lay.°
Tell me now what is your fay,°
And ichil lere° wel fawe."°

835 Then said that levedi hende and fre,
"Understand, sir, par charité,
On Jhesu Christes lay:°
How He was and ever shall be
O° God and Persones Three,
And light° in Mary that may,
840 And in her body nam° flesh and blood,
And how He bought us on the rode,°
Upon the Good Friday;
And how His gost° went to Helle
Sathanas pousté° for to felle
845 And brought mankind away.

"The thirdd day in the morning
To live He rose withouten lesing°
As He came of the rode,
And gave His frendes comforting
850 And stey° to heaven as mightful king
Bothe with flesh and blood.
As it is founden in holy writ,
On His Father right hand He sit,
And is well mild of mode;°
855 As it is writen in the creed,
He demeth° bothe the quick° and dead
The feeble and eke° the gode.

"And all this world shall todrive,°
And man arise from dead to live,
860 Right dome° to understand.
And then shall Jhesu, withouten strive,°
Show His bloody woundes five

That He for us gan fond.^o
 And then shall He withouten mis^o
 865 Deem^o each man after he is,
 Earl, baroun, and bond.^o
 Leve^o hereon," she said than,^o
 "And do thee make^o a Christian man
 For no thing thou no wond."^o
 870
 Then said the sultan, "Dame, be stille.
 I shall be christned through Godes wille
 Er than^o the thirddde day.
 Loath me were my soul to spille.^o
 Pray now the priest, he came us tille
 875 And teach me Christian lay
 As priveliche as it may be.
 That no man wite^o but we three
 Als forth^o as ye may.
 And^o any it wist^o high or lowe,
 880 Thou shalt be brent and I todrawe^o
 And^o we forsoke our fay."^o
 Anon the priest answered than^o
 Hendeliche^o to that sultan
 "Sir, icham^o ready here
 885 With alle the power that I can
 For to make thee Christian man
 And Godes lay^o to lere."^o
 His hand upon his breast he laid,
 "In verbo Dei,"^o he swore and said,
 890 "Unto you bothe yfere,^o
 Well true and trusty shall I be
 With alle that ever falleth to me
 To help with my power."
 895 Amorwe,^o when the priest gan wake,
 A well fair vessel he gan take

With water clear and cold,
And halwed^o it for the sultan sake
And his prayer he gan make
To Jhesu that Judas sold
900 And to Marie, His mother dear,
Tho^o that the sultan christned were,
That was so stout and bold,
He should give him might and space
Through his virtue and his grace
905 His christendom well to hold.

And when it was light of day
The riche sultan there he lay
Up began to arise.
To the priest he went his way
910 And help him alle that he may
That fell to his servise.
And when the priest hadde tho^o
Dight^o ready that fell thereto
In all manner wise,
915 The sultan with good will anon
Dede off^o his clothes everichon
To receive his baptize.^o

The Christian priest hight^o Cleophas;
He cleped^o the sultan of Damas
920 After his owne name.
His hide^o that black and loathly was
All white became through Godes grace
And clear withouten blame.
And when the sultan saw that sight,
925 Then leved^o he wele on God almight;
His care went to game.^o
And when the priest had alle ysaïd
And holy water on him laid,
To chamber they went ysame.^o

930 When he came there^o the levedi^o lay,
"Lo, dame," he gan to say,
"Certain, thy God is true."
The levedi thanked God that day;
For joy she wept with eyghen^o gray,
935 Unnethe^o her lord she knewe.
Then wist^o she well in her thought
That on Mahoun leved he nought
For changed was his hewe.^o
For that her lord was christned so,
940 Away was went all her woe—
Her joy gan wax^o all newe.

"My lord," she said with herte free,
"Sende now this priest in privity^o
To my father the king,
945 And pray him for the love of me
That he com swithe hither to thee
With alle that he may bring.
And when my father is to thee come,
Do christen thy land alle and some,
950 Bothe old and ying.
And he that will be christned nought,
Loke to the death that he be brought,
Withouten any dwelling."^o

The sultan took the priest by hand
955 And bad him wende^o and not no wond^o
To the king of Tars ful yare,^o
And do^o him al to understond
How Jhesu Christ through His sond^o
Hath brought them out of care,
960 And bid him bring with him his host^o
Priveliche withouten boast^o—
For nothing he no spare.

965 And Cleophas, with good intent,
To do the sultan's commandment
To Tars he gan fare.

And when the priest, Sir Cleophas,
Com to the court through Godes grace
Withouten any dwelling,
970 He told the king all that cas:
How the child dead born was,
A misforschapen thing,
And through the prayer of his wife
How God had sent it limb and life
975 In water ate christening,
And how that heathen sultan
Was become a Christian man
Through the might of Heaven king.

He read the letter that he brought,
And in the letter he found ywrought—
980 In gest as I you say—
How that the sultan him besought
To come to him and let it nought
Upon a certain day,
And bring with him alle his host
985 To take his land by everich coast,
And search in his cuntray;
Who that wold nought christned be,
He should be hanged upon a tree
990 Withouten any delay.

Blither might no man ben.
He cleped his barons and the queen
And told them thus in sawe
How the sultan stout and keen
995 Was christned withouten ween
And leved on Christes lawe,

“And therefore he hath don sent me by sond^o
He will do christen alle his lond
If that he might well fawe,^o
And he that will not take christening,
1000 No be he never so high lording,
He shall hang and drawe.^o

“And therefore I pray you now right,
Earl, baroun, duke, and knight,
Do alle your folk bide
1005 With helm on heved^o and brini^o bright
That ye ben alle ready dight^o
To help me at this nede.”
They sent over al by ich a side^o
For many Christian men that tide
1010 That doughty were of dede.
The king him dight for to wende^o
With sixty thousand knightes hende^o
That was a fair ferred.^o

1015 The king came withouten lett^o
The selve day that him was set
To the sultan well yare.^o
And when they were together met,
A merry greeting there was gret^o
With lordings less and more.
1020 There was ruth^o forto seen
How the levedi^o fell on kneen^o
Before her father there;
There was joy and mirth also
To hear them speken of wele and woe
1025 Her aventours as they were.

The sultan dede his barons calle
And sethen^o anon his knightes alle
And after alle his meyné,^o

1030 And when they come into the halle,
He said, "How so it bifalle,
Ye mot^o ychristned be.
Myselfen, I have Mahoun forsake
And Christendom I have ytake,
And certes^o so mot ye.
1035 And they that will not so anon^o
They schul be heveded^o erverichon^o
By Him that dyed on tree."

When he hadde thus ytold
Many Saracen stout and bold
1040 That in his court were,
Many said that they wold,
And many said that they nold^o
Be christned in none manner.
Tho^o that Mahoun would forsake,
1045 Christian men he let them make
And were him lief^o and dear;
And he that did not by his rede^o
Anon he dede strike off his head
Right fast by the swere.^o
1050

The sultan had in prison dight^o
Ten thousand Christian men, yplight,^o
Of many uncouth thede.^o
He did them liver^o anon right
And tho^o that were strong and wight,^o
1055 He gave them armor and stede;^o
And tho he saw that might not so,
He gave them mete^o and drink thereto
And alle that them was nede.
There might men see with that sultan
1060 Many blithe^o Christian man,
In gest^o as so we rede.

When he had don thus that tide,
 Over all his land by each a side
 The word well wide sprong.
 1065 Five heathen kinges that tide^o
 And many heathen duke unride^o
 With people great and strong
 They sent aboute near and fer^o
 Upon that sultan for to war,
 1070 And said for that wrong,
 By Mahoun and Ternagaunt,
 There should not ben his warrant^o
 But been drawe and hong.⁹

Tho five kinges of proud parayle^o
 1075 Dight^o them ready to that bateyl;
 Well stout and strong they were.
 How the sultan gan them assail
 And what they hete^o withouten fail,
 Now herken and ye may hear.
 1080 King Canadok and King Lesias,
 King Carmel and King Clamadas,
 And King Memarok¹ their fere.^o
 Upon the sultan with war they went,
 His men they slew, his townes brent
 1085 With strengthe and great power.

The king of Tars and the sultan,
 Day of bateyle they gun tan^o
 Again tho kinges five.
 Ac ever again^o a Christian man,
 1090 Ten heathen houndes were than
 Of Saracens stout and stithe.^o
 Now herkneth to me bothe old and ying
 How the sultan and the king
 Amonges them gun drive,

1095 And how the Saracens that day
Opped hevedles^o for their pay^o—
Now listen and ye may lithe.^o

The Christian sultan that tide
Took a spear and gan to ride
1100 To Canadok that was keen.
And Canadok with great pride,
With a spear gan him abide
To wite and nought atwene.^o
So hard they driven together there
1105 That their lances both yfere^o
Brosten^o them bitweene.
The sultan drew his fauchon^o good
The kinges heved^o with alle the hood
He strook off quite and clene.^o
1110

King Lesias of Tabarie
To the sultan he gan heye,^o
For Canadok his felawe.
With a spere that was trusty
He rode to the sultan well on hey^o
1115 And thought him have yslawe.^o
The king of Tars between them rod
And Lesias strok he abod,^o
As I finde in my sawe,^o
And smote him so on the shield
1120 That top seyl^o in the field;
He made him overthrawe.^o

He leapt on horse and gan to ride
And slough adown^o by each a side
That^o he before him founde.
1125 Whom that Lesias hit in that tide,^o
Were he duke or prince of pride,
He gave him deadly wounde.

The king of Tars came with a spere
And through his sides he gan it bere
1130 That dead he fell to ground.
Then set the Saracens up a cry
"A, Mahoun, full of maistry,
Help us in this stounde!"
When King Carmel heard that, him was woe;
1135 To fight anon he was full thro.
A spear in hand he hent.
He pricked his steed and dede him go.
He thought the king of Tars to slo
Er he thennes went.
1140 He smote the king of Tars that tide
Through his hauberk a wounde wide
That nigh he had him shent.
The king out of his saddle fell;
The blood out of his wound gan well
1145 That many man them biment.
For sorwe the sultan would wede;
When he saw his woundes blede,
He rode to him with mayn.
He and the Christian ferred
1150 Brought the king of Tars his stede
And set him up again.
And when he was on horse brought
Alle that ever he araught
He clef him to the brain.
1155 King Carmel tho to him went
And gave him such another dent
That near he had him slain.
And when the sultan that yseighe
All wode he wex for wrathe neye—
1160 He rode to King Carmele.

He smote him on the helme an heighe^o
 That through the brain it fleighe^o
 That no leech^o might him heal.
 King Clamadas came riding than^o
 1165 With a glaive^o to the sultan,
 And thought with him to deal,
 And smote him above the shield
 That nigh he felled him in the field
 Among tho houndes fele.^o
 1170
 The king of Tars in that stounde
 Had spite of that heathen hounde
 That was so stout and beld.^o
 He swore, "By Him that tholed^o wounde
 1175 The dogge shall adown to grounde
 That fightes thus in field."
 He rode to him anon right
 And smote to him a stroke of might—
 Atwo he clef his shield
 And through his heart the sword gan glide;
 1180 The blood ran out by each a side
 And so he him aqueld.^o

 Then was King Memaroc in great pain,
 For his four felawes were slain
 And in the field todreved.^o
 1185 He pricked his steed upon the plain
 And fly away with might and mayn^o
 For dread to hide his heved.^o
 The sultan saw him away ride;
 He pricked after him in that tide,
 1190 For no thing he it bileved,^o
 And smote him so above the shield
 That helm and heved flew in the field
 Full wightlike^o off it weved.^o

1195 When the Saracens sawen alle
That Memarok was to grounde yfalle
And namore up arise,
"Allas, Mahoun!" they gan to calle,
"Whi latestow^o Christian hewe us small?
Wicke^o is thy servise!"
1200 They flew for dread alle yfere^o
And dreynt^o them in o^o river
So sore them gan agrise.^o
The battle last swithe^o long
Till it were time of evensong
1205 Er^o they might win the prize.

The Saracens flew by each a side;
The Christian folk after gan ride,
And shed them brain and blood.
There was none that might him hide
1210 That he nas slain in that tide
With fight against them stood.
And tho^o that yold them to the pes,^o
The sultan swore withouten les^o
By Him that died on rode,
1215 He that nold nought forsake his lay,^o
He should forlesse^o that ich^o day
The bal up in the hode.²

Thirty thousand there were take
Of Saracens both blo^o and black
1220 And don^o in his prisoun.
And he that would his lay forsake,
Christian men he let them make³
With great devocioun.
And they that would be christned not,
1225 Into a stede^o they weren ybrought
A mile withouten the town

And Christian men withouten wene^o
 Striken off their hevedes^o all bidene.^o

1230 Thus the lady with her lore
 Brought her frendes out of sore^o
 Through Jhesu Christes grace.
 All the while that they were there
 The joy that was among them yare^o
 No man may telle the space.

1235 When they were out of world iwent
 Before God Omnipotent
 Them was diht^o a place.
 Now Jhesu that is full of might
 Graunt us alle in Hevene light

1240 To see Thy swete face. AMEN.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is drawn from F. Krause's 1888 edition, which relies on the so-called Auchinleck Manuscript in the National Library of Scotland. Here it has been significantly altered: spelling within the text has been modernized wherever such a change does not interfere with sense or meter.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An imagined Christian kingdom bordering China.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: He would not receive his daughter.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: May ill fortune befall him.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Let us know your judgment.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Their complexion changed.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: No one might prevent it.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: You need not fear anything.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The text ignorantly imagines Islam to be polytheistic, image based, and syncretistic in its choice of deities.
 "Ternagaunt" designates the god imagined in popular medieval

literature to be worshipped in Islam; "Mahoun" is a contraction of "Muhammad."[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: In another gross misrepresentation of Islamic practice, the text imagines the Muslim sultan swearing by classical Roman gods, Jove and Pluto.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: No man shall stand in for him.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The names of supposed gods of the Muslim sultan, as absurdly imagined and, furthermore, erroneously conceived as idols, in this text: Muhammad, Apollo, Astaroth, and Jove.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: He was utterly despondent.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: He left no limb joined to another.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: May the devil set them on fire![Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: This stanza is short three lines.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: For fear of being betrayed.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Who would not be drawn (that is, dragged behind a horse) and hanged.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: So far as can be deduced, the names are fictional.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An unusual expression for "head," attested elsewhere in the Auchinleck manuscript.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: He allowed them to become Christians.[Return to reference 3](#)

Notes

- °: *young*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Mary's (Jesus's mother)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *powerful*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Damascus*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *person*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *expression*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *complexion*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bright eyes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *neck*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *praise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in five pieces*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maiden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *however*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine cloth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maddened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speech*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rather*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not want* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Muslim*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sooner obtain the devil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *but* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straightaway*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *might I prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trouble and punishment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unto him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abandon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *course*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *retinue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behaved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Saint Muhammad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forcefully* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *control* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *highest* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fully composed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fierce* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to do* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *offered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *people* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splendidly clothed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rather* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proven wrong* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *command* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *battle* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *huge company* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would they delay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bold* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gleamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *army* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *hacked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(Saracens)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ditch* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stranger and kin* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble face* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *succeeded Muhammad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffered defeat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there were none* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unhorsed him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *but* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belief* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harm* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cut off* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *headpieces* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for the sake of both* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lamentation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *defeated* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *royal cloth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confrontation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroyed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burned* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in every way*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will (not)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tolerate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grievous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woman*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *request*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrange it quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *occur*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intends*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *voice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *therefore* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *composed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *read*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *present*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to both of them* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happiness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deception*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fellowship*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great display*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble and courteous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ten times*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *readied themselves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chariot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *miserable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *come*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grieving*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *let's move on from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *young*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chariot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *could* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *royal cloth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be fetched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woman* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *face*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *companion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *show of happiness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *approach* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maiden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *religion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kind*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *story*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *directly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beautiful*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *began to dawn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *black*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accosted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harshly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strike*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *threats*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dragon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hideously* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shaped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fiends* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *filthy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *but* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deception*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *marvel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spoke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(his) humanity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *creature*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed her dearly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maiden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *religion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Saint Muhammad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless you*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *slay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *demeanor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *early*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *times*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made her confession of faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *could he to no man express*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a row*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *his words*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a stringed instrument*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *religion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deceived*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lament*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *announced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at that time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rode* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a row*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *show*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stayed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *when*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gathered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the tale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cut off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cleaved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scattered*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *groaned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strength* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the next day* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maiden* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belief* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the tale* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fitting* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to the highest degree* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *songs or tales* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two weeks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abundance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for three months only* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *color or appearance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delighted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ecstatic* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prayed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *protect* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from confinement* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lump* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cut* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *despondent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *first* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prove* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joint* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *properly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *infant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begotten* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *belief* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fares* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neglect anything* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to them* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beloved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *life* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the shape of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrayed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laid it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great power* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saint* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rose* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hoarse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a start* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baffled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cry* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intensity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *started* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knocked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thoroughly* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *head*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for a good while*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as stone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the shape of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *graciously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tried*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *permission* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *savior (lit., "healer")*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for fear of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remarkable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *direction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *such*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I am* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *interlude*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baptized*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *integral*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very event*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seek* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high and low*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noon*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *false images of gods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *command*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble lady*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greeted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you are*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by the Word of God* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ago*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *but*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *displeases me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injustice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set aside your misery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *predicament*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreetly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baptize*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commanded*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *longer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *face*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the tale*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *born*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *missing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stayed there*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *went* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in front of the sultan*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lady*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *covered*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rich cloth*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *baptized*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spoke*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pig*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in comparison to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *my beloved*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *I am* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *very*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Saint*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *half* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *yours*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless you are christened*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *suffered*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *afraid* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *punishment*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *then*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *express*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *I will* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *truly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *burnt and drawn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *but* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for charity*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *speech*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *I have* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *religious belief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *law*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alighted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *power*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deception*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ascended*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judges* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *living*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disperse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *opposition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *experienced*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fail*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bondman*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make yourself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stray*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condemn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *readily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *known*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burned and drawn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *graciously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I am*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *law* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by the word of God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the next day*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consecrated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *when*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baptism*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turned to mirth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scarcely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *color*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *increase*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *err*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *readily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *messenger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *army*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *display*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *case*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at the*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *composed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the tale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay it*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happier*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speech*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doctrine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *messenger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drag behind a horse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coat of mail*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on every side*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fellowship*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knees*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *retinue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for certain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beheaded* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every one*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *would not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beloved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counsel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cast*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unknown peoples*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deliver*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *horses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the tale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ferocious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *far*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *supporter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *companion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *encountered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hopped headless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *punish without delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curved sword*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *completely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hasten*[Return to reference](#) °

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THE BOOK OF JOHN MANDEVILLE

ca. 1356

The Book of John Mandeville was one of the most popular works of the Western Middle Ages, surviving in nearly three hundred medieval manuscripts. It takes its readers on a tour of the world ordered by eastward movement, from England to Constantinople (now Istanbul), onward to India and China, and finally, at its furthest point, to the gates of the earthly paradise. Full of concrete descriptions, the *Book* offers its readers a wonder-filled globe, one replete with marvelous objects, strange creatures, and surprising cultural practices. These diverse phenomena are framed within a decidedly Christian and European outlook—one that regards Jerusalem and its surrounding territories as Christian by right and that delivers the whole world for the delight and education of European audiences.

The *Book* was composed in French prose, probably around 1356, and the author-narrator claims to be an English knight who traveled the world for thirty-four years, although this is now regarded as a fiction. The *Book* immediately began circulating in various adaptations and translations, appearing in Latin, Middle English, and at least eight other European languages. Despite Mandeville's claim that the *Book* is based on eyewitness experience, modern scholarship reveals it to be a creative patchwork of many different texts—by, for instance, Greco-Roman philosophers, Christian pilgrims, Crusaders, mendicant missionaries, and medieval

merchants. Two of the author's most important sources are genuine medieval travel memoirs: one by William of Boldensele, a Christian pilgrim to the Levant, and the other the account by Odoric of Pordenone of his missionary journey to India and China. In his *Book*, the *Mandeville*-author makes the geographic and cultural information of these Latin texts accessible to lay (secular) readers. The work that results is not a story per se, although the author does include occasional first-person anecdotes about Mandeville's adventures. It is ultimately an encyclopedic itinerary, tracing a path across the surface of the *mappa mundi* (world map; see [pp. 287–88](#)). Copies of *The Book of John Mandeville* were often vividly illustrated, with colorful images that brought remote societies and fantastical bodies before readers' eyes (See the Image Gallery for this volume).

The *Book* begins with a devotional prologue, which anchors world geography in Christian sacred history: the locations of Jesus's life and death are at the center of the world. This prologue echoes the ideology of the Crusades, a series of religious wars waged between 1095 and 1291 as members of the Western Church sought to seize Jerusalem and surrounding territories from Islamic rule. While early Crusaders enjoyed military success, conquering Jerusalem in 1099, European armies eventually lost control of the region. Defeat at the city of Acre in 1291 was the end of Crusader presence in the region. *The Book of John Mandeville* voices nostalgia for past Christian military success. The author-narrator criticizes the noblemen of his day for infighting instead of seeking the Christian "inheritance" in the Holy Land. The *Book* even contrives to have the Mamluk sultan in Cairo parrot this rhetoric. At the end of the *Book*, the pope himself is said to validate Mandeville's account and vouch for its truth.

Geography, bodies, and social practices are entangled throughout *The Book of John Mandeville*. The *Book* shows us localized groups who share distinctive physiologies and idiosyncratic religious, political, and cultural practices. Sometimes these peoples hover on the very edge of human identity. Pay attention to the passage below in which Mandeville invokes the scientific idea that planets influence particular regions. The effects of Saturn on one territory are said to

affect the inhabitants corporeally, making them sedentary—while the moon’s influence disposes Europeans to be fast-moving travelers (a convenient truth for Mandeville!). Such experiments in describing, explaining, and physicalizing human difference were part of the *Book’s* legacy for the early modern period, an era that saw the development of the transatlantic slave trade and European settler colonies. Explorers and colonizers including Christopher Columbus (d. 1506) and Walter Raleigh (d. 1618) are known to have read *The Book of John Mandeville*. It was also a source for later works of English literature such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

Our source for the Modern English translation here was the dominant English-language version of the text between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Richard Pynson drew on it for his print edition (ca. 1496), on which most subsequent English printings were based.

From The Book of John Mandeville¹

[*Preface*]

Here begins *The Book of John Mandeville*, knight of England, who was born in the town of Saint Albans² and traveled about the world in many diverse countries to see marvels and customs of countries and different kinds of folks and diverse shapes of men and beasts. And all the marvels that he saw, he wrote and told in this book, which contains twenty-two chapters. And this knight went out of England and over the sea in the year of our Lord 1332 and passed through many lands, countries, and islands, and compiled this book and had it written in the year of our Lord 1366, thirty-four years after he went out of his country, for he was traveling thirty-four years.³

Hic Incipit Prologus Istius Libri.⁴

Since the land over the sea, which is to say the Holy Land, which men call the land of Bethany, among all lands is the most worthy and is sovereign over all other lands and is blessed and hallowed and sanctified by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ—in this land, it pleased Him⁵ to take on flesh and blood from the Virgin Mary and to honor this land with His blessed foot. And there He wished to do many miracles and preach and teach the faith and law of us Christians to His dear children. And there He would suffer many insults and mockeries for our sake. And He that was king of Heaven and earth, of air and sea and things that are contained within them, He would only be called king of that land when He said, *Rex sum Judeorum*. That means: “I am king of the Jews.”⁶ For at that time the land was Jewish.

And that land He had chosen before all other lands as the most virtuous and most worthy in the world. And therefore the philosopher says thus: *virtus rerum in medio consistit*. That means: "the virtue of things is in the middle."⁷ And in that land He would lead His life and endure suffering and death from the Jews⁸ in order to redeem us and deliver us from pains of Hell and death without end, which was ordained to us on account of the sin of our forefather Adam and for our own sins also. He did not suffer death for His own sake, for He deserved no wrong since He never did any wrong. And He that was king of joy, He might in that place best suffer death. For whoever will do anything that he wishes to be known widely, he will have it announced openly in the middle of a city or town. So did He that was king of the world. He chose to suffer death in Jerusalem, which is in the middle of the world, so that it might be known to people in all parts of the world how dearly He bought humankind, whom He made according to His likeness, on account of the great love that He had for us. For more valuable property might not be staked for us than His blessed body and His precious blood, which He offered for us.

Lo, dear God, what love He had for his subjects, when He who had done no transgression, only for our transgressions suffered death. Right well should men love and dread and worship such a lord and praise a land so holy, which brought forth such a fruit, through which every man is saved unless by his own fault. This is the land that belongs to our inheritance. And in that land He chose to die and took possession of it to leave to His children. Therefore every good Christian man who has means should exert himself to conquer our true inheritance and chase away the misbelievers. For we are called Christian men from "Christ," our Father. And if we are true children of Christ, we should then claim the true heritage of our Father and take it out of foreign men's hands.

But now pride, greed, and envy have enflamed the hearts of lords of this world, so that they are more concerned to impoverish their neighbors than to claim and conquer their true heritage, aforementioned. And common people who would give their bodies

and wealth to conquer our inheritance may not do so without lords. For an assembly of the common people without a chief lord is like a flock of sheep that has no shepherd: they scatter and do not know where to go. But if God would grant that worldly lords agree with one another and with the common people that they should take this holy voyage over the sea, I believe then, within a little while, our aforesaid true heritage should be recovered and put in the hands of the proper heirs of Jesus Christ.

And because men desire to hear talk of the Holy Land and take from it great enjoyment, entertainment, and comfort, I will tell some of what I have seen—I, John Mandeville, knight, though I am not worthy, who was born in England in the town of Saint Albans and crossed the sea in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ 1332, upon Saint Michael's Day.⁹ And ever since then I have been a long time overseas, and I have seen and gone through many lands, and I have resided in many provinces and kingdoms. I have passed through Turkey and Syria, Armenia the Lesser and the Greater, Tartary, Persia, Arabia, Egypt the High and the Low, Libya, Chaldea, and a great part of Ethiopia, Amazonia, and much of India the Greater and the Less, and through many other islands that are around India, where many different peoples dwell with diverse customs, laws, and shapes. About these lands and islands, I will speak more fully. And I'll tell a part of what I have seen in the world as it may come to my mind hereafter—and especially for those who wish and intend to visit the holy city of Jerusalem and the holy places that are around there, I'll tell the routes that men should take there, for I have many times traveled and ridden to Jerusalem in the company of great lords and other good company.

[The book begins with a detailed account of itineraries to Jerusalem, together with descriptions of sites of interest along the way and in the Levant itself. In the course of his account, Mandeville reports that he has worked as a mercenary for the Mamluk Sultan in Cairo, during the Muslim ruler's wars against the Bedouins.]

From *Chapter 12. Truth of Saracens*

Since I have told you about the Saracens¹ and their lands, if you like I will tell you a part of their laws and their faith, as their book recounts, which is called *Akkaron*.² And some men call the book *Mesap*, and some *Arne*,³ according to diverse customs of language. This book Machomet⁴ gave to them, in which he wrote, among other things (as I have seen and read many times) that a man who is good will go to Paradise and a man who is wicked will go to Hell—and all Saracens believe that.

* * *

And they have many good articles of our faith, and they know much of Holy Scripture and of prophecies, although they write them in their own language. But they don't understand it, or do so only literally and not spiritually. And therefore Saint Paul says as follows: *Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat*. That means, "The letter kills, and the spirit makes live."⁵ And the Saracens say that the Jews are wicked, for they do not uphold their law, which Moses brought them. Also Christian men are wicked people, for they do not uphold the Ten Commandments, which Jesus Christ sent to them.

And therefore I shall tell you a tale. I was with the Sultan in his chamber one day, and he emptied the room of all ranks of men, for he said that he would speak to me confidentially. And he asked me how Christian men governed themselves in their country.

And I said, "Very well, thanks be to God."

And he said, "Surely not, for your priests care nothing for God's service. They should provide an example to men to do well, but they give wicked examples. And when your people should go to holy church on a holy day to serve God, they go instead to tavern and to market, and they live in gluttony and greed day and night, and eat and drink like beasts that don't know when they've had enough."⁶ Also, Christian men," he said, "labor to fight among themselves and

deceive one another. Also," he said, "they are so prideful that they can't decide what they should wear—now long clothes, now short clothes, now tight clothes, now loose clothes.

"And they should be honest," he said, "and meek and true, and give charity as Jesus did, in whom they believe. But they are so greedy," he said, "that for a little silver, they will sell their wives and children and sisters. One man takes another man's wife, and no man well keeps his pledges to another. It is on account of their own sins," he said, "that Christians have lost all the land that we now hold, and for your sins God has given these lands to us, not on account of our strength. For you well know," he said, "that when you serve your God well, then he will help you, so that no man can stand against you. And you understand by your prophecies that Christians will again conquer these lands, when they serve their God well. But while they live so wickedly as they do, we have no fear of them, for their God will not help them."

And then I asked him how he knew the state of Christians so thoroughly. And he said he knew very well, concerning both commoners and lords, by means of his messengers, whom he sent through all lands as though they were merchants with precious stones and other merchandise, to understand the customs of every land. And then he called again all the lords into his chamber. And he showed me four who were great lords in that country, who described my country and other countries of Christendom as though they had been men of that same country. And they spoke French very well, as did the Sultan too. And then I marveled at the great shame of Christian men. For those who should be converted by our good teaching and example to the Christian faith are instead put off by our wicked model of living. And therefore it is no wonder that they call us wicked men. But the Saracens are faithful, for they truly keep the commandments of their *Ackaron*.⁷

* * *

[*Mandeville continues his travels eastward.*]

From *Chapter 13. Diversities of People and of Countries*

There is a river that runs through the land that men call India. In that river, one finds eels twenty feet long. In India, there are more than five thousand islands where people dwell. And on each island there are many cities and people, for the inhabitants of India are of such a condition that they do not often depart from their own land. For they dwell under a planet that is called Saturn, and that planet makes its orbit through the twelve astrological signs over twenty years, while the moon takes a month to pass through the twelve signs.⁸ And since Saturn is so slow-moving, therefore the people who dwell under this planet have no strong will to do much traveling about. And our country is just the opposite, for we are in a climate that belongs to the moon and quick movement, for that is the planet of travel. And therefore it gives us the impulse to be moving often and to go into diverse countries of the world, for the moon passes about the world more swiftly than any other planet.

* * *

In this land,⁹ and in many others around it, men may not see the star that is called Tramontana,¹ which stands due north and never moves, by which sailors are led—for the star is not visible in the south. But there is another star that is called Antarctic, and that is directly opposite of that other star. And by this star, sailors are led toward the south, and it is not seen in the north. And therefore men may well understand that the land and the sea are entirely round, for parts of the sky that are visible in one place do not appear in another.² And one may prove it thus: if one might find a sea-voyage and men who wish to go to sea, one might travel all around the earth, above and beneath. And I can prove this according to what I have seen. For I have been in Brabant³ and seen the astrolabe⁴ reading for the star Tramontana, and it is 54 degrees high in Germany, and toward Bohemia is 59 degrees, and further north it is 62 degrees in height and some minutes.

And you should understand that opposite the star in the north is the Antarctic star. These two stars never move, and the firmament turns on them like a wheel on an axle, so that these two stars divide all the sky into two parts. * * * And therefore I say with certainty that a man could travel all about the world, above and beneath, and come again to his own country, if he had a ship. And he will always find many lands and islands in that region, for I know well that these people who dwell right under the Antarctic star are foot against foot with us and those who dwell under the Tramontana. And these people who dwell opposite of us are foot against foot, for all parts of the earth have their contraries set opposite them.

And you should understand that the land of Prester John,⁵ emperor of India, is under us. For if a man goes from Scotland or England toward Jerusalem, he travels ever upward, for our land is in the lowest part of the west, and the land of Prester John is in the lowest part of the east. And they have day when we have night, and night when we have day. And as much as someone ascends upward out of our country toward Jerusalem, just as much will that one travel downward toward the land of Prester John from Jerusalem, and that is because the entire earth is round.

Now you have probably heard that Jerusalem is in the middle of the world, and that may be well demonstrated as follows: if a man there takes a spear and plants it straight in the earth at midday (when night and day are of equal lengths), the spear makes no shadow. And David bears witness to this when he says, *Deus operatus est salute in medio terre*. That means, "God has wrought salvation in the middle of the earth."⁶ And therefore all who depart from our western countries for Jerusalem, however far upward they travel as they go there, that far downward will they travel as they go into the land of Prester John from Jerusalem. And so one may venture to these islands, thanks to the roundness of the earth and sea, until one arrives right underneath us.

And therefore I have thought many times of a tale I heard when I was young, how a worthy man from our country set forth once to see the world. And he passed India and these islands beyond India,

of which there are more than five thousand. And he traveled so long by land and by sea, looking about the world, that he found an island where he heard his own speech and where those herding animals were saying such words as men did in his own country—at which he was greatly amazed, for he didn't know how this could be. But I say that he had gone so long over land and sea, traveling about the world, that he had come to his own borders. But because he could travel no further, he turned again as he had come, and so he had a great journey. And it befell afterward that he went toward Norway, thanks to a wind storm at sea, which drove him so that he arrived on an island. And when he disembarked, he thought that it was the island where he had been before, where he heard his own language spoken as men herded animals. And that may well be true, despite the fact that ignorant men do not believe that anyone can pass beneath the earth. For just as we think that these people are under us, so they think that we are under them!

* * *

[Mandeville returns to the task of describing the islands near India.]

And in some of these islands there are people who have only one eye, which is in the middle of their forehead, and they eat nothing but raw meat. And on another island live people who have no head at all, and their eyes are in their shoulders and their mouth, in their chest. And on another island there are people who have flat faces, without nose or eyes, but they have two small holes instead of eyes and they have a flat, lipless mouth. And on another island are people who are both man and woman and have the organs of both. And when they want to, they can use both, one at one time and the other at another time. And they beget children when they use the man's organs, and they bear children when they use the organs of the woman.

There are many other kinds of people there, about whom there is too much to tell. But in order to continue on, one comes to an island

where the men are very small, and they have a little hole instead of their mouth, and they might not eat. But when they need to eat or drink, they suck it through a pipe that is hollow all through.

* * *

[Mandeville travels onward to "Cathay," or Mongol-controlled northern China, ruled by the "Great Khan."]

From *Chapter 17. Arrangement of the Court of the Great Khan*

Now I have told you why he is called the Great Khan. Next I will tell you about the organization of his court when they have great feasts, and that is principally at four times in the year. The first feast is for the Khan's birthday; the second for the day when he was carried into the temple to be circumcised; the third is for his idols, when they first began to speak; and the fourth is when his idols first began to do miracles. And at these times, he has his men well arranged by thousands and hundreds, and every man knows well what he should do. First, there are 4000 rich barons ordered to organize the feast and serve the emperor. And these barons have gold crowns finely decorated with pearls and precious stones, and they are all clothed very richly in garments of gold and camaca.⁷ And they can very well have such clothes, for there these are of less cost than woolen clothes are here. And these 4000 barons are divided into 4 groups, and each group is clothed in a different color, very richly. And when the first thousand have passed and displayed themselves, then comes the second thousand, and so the third, and so the fourth. And none of them speaks a word.

And by the emperor's side, at the emperor's table, sit numerous philosophers expert in many sciences—astronomy, necromancy, geometry, pyromancy,⁸ and many other sciences. Some of them have astrolabes of gold and precious stones, some spheres, some the skull of a dead man, some vessels of gold full of coals burning.⁹ Some have clocks well and richly made, or other kinds of instruments for their sciences. And at certain hours, when they see it is time, they say to the people that stand before them, "Make peace," and then those men standing there shout aloud, so that everyone in the hall may hear, "Now be still a while!" And then one of the philosophers speaks and says as follows: "Every man do reverence and bow to the emperor, who is God's son and lord of all lords and of all the world, for now it is time." And then everyone

bows and kneels on the ground. And then the philosophers bid them to rise again. And at other hours, other philosophers bid everyone to put their fingers in their ears, and they do so. And at another hour, another philosopher bids that all the people should lay their hands on their mouths, and they do so. And, so, after he tells them to take their hands away, they do so. And thus, from hour to hour, the philosophers command diverse things.

And I asked privately what that meant. And one of these masters said that the bowing and kneeling on the ground at that time was a sign that all those who kneeled would evermore be true to the emperor—that despite any gifts or commands, they would never be traitors to him. And putting fingers in their ears had this meaning, that if any of them should hear any wrong spoken of the emperor, from even their fathers or their mothers or anyone else, they would report it either to the emperor or to his council.

And you should understand that no man gives anything to the emperor—neither bread, nor drink, nor clothes, nor any other necessary thing—except at certain times and hours that the philosophers designate. And if anyone wants to make war against the emperor, no matter what country they are in, these philosophers know it immediately and tell the emperor and his council and send men there to put a stop to it.

Also he has many men to keep birds, such as gerfalcons, sparrowhawks, falcons of excellent breed, male and female lanner falcons, speaking parrots, and other kinds of birds. And he has 11,000 elephants, baboons, and monkeys. And he has physicians to look at his urine,¹ of whom 3000 are Christians and 20, Saracens. But he has more dealings with Christians than with Saracens, and in his court are many barons and others who are Christian and others who have been converted to our faith through the preaching of good Christians who live there. But there are many who desire that no one learns that they are Christians. And the emperor has in his chamber a pillar of gold, upon which is a ruby and a carbuncle² that is a foot long and that gives off light all night to the whole room. And he has

many other precious stones and rubies, but that is the greatest and best.

* * *

[After further accounts of eastern regions, Mandeville concludes his text.]

From *Chapter 22. Why He Is Called Prester John*

* * *

There are many other countries and marvels that I have not seen, and therefore I might not properly speak about them. And also in countries where I have been, there are many marvels of which I haven't spoken, for it would be too long a tale. I will say no more about the marvels that are there, so that others who travel there may find many new things to say, about which I have not told or spoken. For many people have a great fondness and desire to hear about new things. And I, John Mandeville, knight, who went out of my country and crossed the sea in the year of our Lord 1332—and who have passed through many lands, countries, and islands and have now come to rest—I have compiled this book and had it written the year of our Lord 1366, twenty-four³ years after my departure from my country, for I was traveling for thirty-four years.

And because many people do not believe anything unless they have seen it with their own eyes or can understand it with their natural reason, therefore I made my way, in turning homeward, to Rome, to show my book to the holy father, the pope, and told him the marvels which I had seen in diverse countries, so that he, with his wise council, could scrutinize it with the diverse people who were in Rome. For in Rome there are so many people living there from different nations of the world. And a little while later, when he and his council had examined it thoroughly, he said to me with certainty that everything was true therein. For he said he had a book in Latin that contained all that and much more, according to which the *mappa mundi*⁴ was made—which book he showed to me. And therefore the holy father, the pope, has ratified and confirmed my book in all points.

And I ask that all those who read this book or hear it read, that they should pray for me, and I will pray for them. And all those who say for me a *Paster Noster* and an *Ave*,⁵ so that God might forgive me for my sins, I make them partners and grant them part of all my

good pilgrimage and the other good deeds that I have done and worked and will complete before my life's end. And I pray to God, from whom all graces come, that He will fill all those who read or hear this book, who are Christians, with His grace and save them in both body and soul and bring them to His joy that will last forever: He that is, in the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who lives and reigns, God without end. Amen.⁶

Endnotes

- Note 1: Original translation based on the edition of Tamarah Kohanski and C. David Benson, *The Book of John Mandeville* (2007), which follows the so-called Defective Version of the Middle English text.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: English town about 20 miles from London.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This preface, written in the third person, is not found in other versions of the *Book*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Here begins the prologue of this book (Latin).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The present translation observes the convention of capitalizing pronouns referring to Jesus and God.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Latin. See John 19:19–20.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Latin. The narrator adopts Aristotle's claim that virtue lies at the midpoint between behavioral extremes (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.6–9) as evidence that Jerusalem's geographic centrality makes it the holiest spot in a sinful world.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The false claim that Jews were responsible for Christ's death, often used to justify Christian violence against Jewish people, was widespread in the Middle Ages.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: September 29, also known as Michaelmas: a feast day that celebrates Satan's banishment from Heaven and marks the start of shortening daylight hours.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: A term used by medieval Christians to refer to non-Christian Arabs as well as Muslims of varying ethnicities; Mandeville uses it here as a synonym for “Muslims.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Mandeville’s spelling of the Quran.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Versions of Arabic words for, respectively, “book” (*mushaf*) and “sacred” (*haram*).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A widespread Christian misspelling of “Muhammad.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: 2 Corinthians 3:6 (Latin). Medieval Christians often cited this verse to help explain how the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam interpreted scripture wrongly (supposedly “literally” rather than “spiritually”).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A close match to the critical portrayal of Christian behavior in *Piers Plowman*; see pp. 380–81.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Quran.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The manuscript of the base text omits a line of text here; the translation has been emended with reference to other, closely related versions.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: “Lamory,” or Sumatra, which lies partly in the Southern Hemisphere.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Polaris, the North Star.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The passage that follows draws on Johannes de Sacrobosco’s *De sphaera* (On the Sphere, ca. 1230), a treatise on the Ptolemaic (or geocentric) cosmos. Although Mandeville’s actual calculations are confused, it is clear he understands the world as a complete sphere of 360 degrees.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A region in the Low Countries of Europe.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An astronomical instrument that measures the altitude of celestial bodies above the horizon, calculated in degrees (between 0° at the horizon and 90° at the zenith) and minutes (1/60 of a degree).[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: A legendary Christian figure, thought (incorrectly) by medieval Christians to rule over India.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Psalms 74:12 (Vulgate 73:12, misquoting the Latin).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An expensive, silklike fabric.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The art of divination by fire. “Necromancy”: the art of communicating with the dead to predict the future.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The manuscript omits a line of text here; the translation is emended with reference to other versions. Skulls were used in divination.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Uroscopy, or the medical examination of urine, was a common method of diagnosis in the Middle Ages.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A bright red gemstone thought to have powers of illumination.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This is a numerical mistake—24 for 34—of the kind common in manuscript transmission.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: On the *mappa mundi* (map of the world; Latin), see pp. 287–88.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “Our Father” and “Hail [Mary],” the Latin names of common prayers.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The manuscript is missing its final leaf, so the text has been completed with reference to other, closely related, versions.[Return to reference 6](#)

THE CROXTON PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT after 1461

Written and performed nearly two centuries after the expulsion of the Jews from England, *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* demonstrates how fantasies of Jewishness remained central to the Christian religious imagination. Designed to shock and amaze its audience, the play relies for its effects on the obsessions projected onto its Jewish characters and the grotesque bodies they are given. The play's central character is a Jewish merchant named Jonathas, fixated on what he calls the "conceit," or trick, of the Eucharist. The ritualistic transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is a lie, he thinks, and he sets out to prove it. At one point in his efforts, Jonathas discovers that the host, or consecrated bread, has become inexplicably stuck to his hand. He runs around the stage in a panic, begging his Jewish companions to help him remove the clinging wafer. To secure it, they nail the bread (and Jonathas's hand with it) to a post, in an unwitting parody of the Crucifixion. Attempting to yank their leader free, they "pluck the arm, and the hand shall hang still with the sacrament"—as the play's stage directions read. In what must have been a gruesome special effect, Jonathas's Jewish body falls to pieces. Dismembered then healed, violently blasphemous and then piously converted, Jews are treated in the play as a malleable medium for the Christian message.

The Croxton Play of the Sacrament is a miracle play, dramatizing supernatural proofs of divine power. It is set not in the biblical past but in the Middle Ages' own present—"in the year of our Lord, a thousand four hundred sixty and one," as we are told. The play uses stagecraft to make its events vividly present for its viewers—with a Eucharistic "cake" that spews blood, a Jewish hand pulled off, an exploding oven, and a speaking "image" of Jesus, "with wounds bleeding." It veers between comic slapstick and reverent devotion. Though suspicions of Eucharistic fakery receive a miraculous rejoinder in the course of the story, we might also notice how the play's own theatrical spectacle relies on trick-props and devices to create if not fake miracles, then fictional ones. These nonetheless give rise to the enactment of religious and civic unity at the play's end, as the bishop processes with the consecrated host through the assembled crowd of actors and spectators, and the Jews are converted. Note, however, that this is not a version of social harmony able to tolerate the continued existence of Jews as Jews. The play expunges Jewishness from its vision of social cohesion.

The difficulty of believing properly in the Eucharist was a preoccupation of medieval Christianity. The Eucharistic ceremony celebrates the Last Supper, a meal Jesus shares with his disciples before the Crucifixion, where he refers to the bread as "my body" and the wine as "my blood" (see Matthew 26:26–29, Mark 14:22–25, and Luke 22:17–20). According to the doctrine of the Western Church, the priest's consecration of bread and wine is not merely symbolic. Rather, it changes their natures, actually transforming the foodstuffs into Christ's body and blood, in a process known as transubstantiation. Though their observable properties, or "accidents," do not change, their "substance" does.

This invisible but all-important alteration evidently presented a challenge for Christian faith. In the later Middle Ages, miracle stories proliferated recounting how individuals skeptical about the Eucharist witnessed visible, tangible evidence of sacramental change—for instance, with the bread becoming a bleeding chunk of flesh. Sometimes, as in the *Croxton Play*, the skeptics are made out to be

Jews. In such stories, Jewish figures become instruments for exploring and overcoming Christian doubts (or, as in the figure of the Christian merchant Aristorius, very tepid forms of belief). The *Croxton Play* survives in a single manuscript probably copied between 1520 and 1540, a period when transubstantiation was being debated by early modern Protestant reformers and their Catholic opponents. In the play's original fifteenth-century performance context, similar controversies raged. Medieval English Christians holding Wycliffite or Lollard beliefs maintained that even after consecration, the host remained physically bread—a stance considered heretical by the Church.

References to the village of Croxton as well as “Babwell Mill” enable us to locate the play in the vibrant theatrical culture of East Anglia. The *Croxton Play* employs a style of theatrical staging popular in the region, known as place-and-scaffold: several small raised scaffolds are constructed around a central playing space. Three such scaffolds are demanded for the *Croxton Play*—one for the residence of the Christian merchant Aristorius, one for the Jews' lodgings, and one for the church. Even as the play can be identified in its local performance context, it also strives to evoke the wider world. Both Aristorius and Jonathas boast about the far-flung regions linked by their mercantile activity. Indeed, we can understand the *Croxton Play* in part as an effort to grapple with the globalizing cash economy of the later Middle Ages. What is and isn't for sale?

The *Croxton Play* is written for the most part in four-stress lines, arranged in quatrains with alternating rhyme, *a b a b*. Many of these quatrains are linked into eight-line stanzas (*a b a b b c b c*). Yet there is some variation, with occasional three-stress lines and several other stanzaic forms. Indeed, the playwright seems to have associated shifts in stanzaic structure with turning points in the action. Although the play's language has been partly modernized, rhyme is preserved, as well as the pattern of four stressed syllables per line.

The Croxton Play of the Sacrament¹

THE NAMES AND NUMBER OF THE PLAYERS:²

JESUS JASON, second Jew

BISHOP JASDON, third Jew

ARISTORIUS, Christian merchant MASPHAT, fourth Jew

PRIEST MALCHUS, fifth Jew

CLERK MASTER BRUNDICH, physician

JONATHAS, first Jew, master COLLE, servant

NINE MAY PLAY IT AT EASE.³

*RC*⁴

[The Banns]⁵

FIRST HERALD

Now the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost,
That all this wide world have wrought,^o
Save all these seemly,^o both least and most,
And bring you to the bliss that he hath you to-
bought!

5 We be full purposed^o with heart and with thought
Of our matter to tell the intent,^o

Of the marvels that were wondrously wrought
Of o the holy and blessed sacrament.

SECOND HERALD

Sovereigns, and it like o you to hear the purpose of
this play
That is represented now in your sight, 6
10 Which in Aragon was done, the sooth o to say,
In Heraclea, 7 that famous city, aright—
Therein wonneth o a merchant of mickle o might,
Sir Aristory was called his name,
Kenned o full o far with many a wight, o
15 Full far in the world sprang his fame.

FIRST HERALD

Anon o to him there came a Jew,
With great riches o for the nones, 8
And wonneth o in the city of Surrey o—this full true—
20 The which had great plenty of precious stones.

Of this Christian merchant he frained sore, o
When he would have had his intent. o
Twenty pound and merchandise more
He proffered for the holy sacrament.

SECOND HERALD

25 But the Christian merchant thereof said nay, o
Because his proffer o was of so little value;
A hundred pound but o he would pay
No longer thereon he should pursue.

But more of their purpose o they gan speke, o
The holy sacrament for to bey; o
30 And all for o they would be wreke, o
A great sum of gold began down lay.

FIRST HERALD

This Christian merchant consented, the sooth^o to
say,
And in the night after, made him deliverance.^o
These Jews all great joy made they;
35 But of^o this betide^o a stranger chance:^o

They grieved^o our Lord greatly on ground,^o
And put him to a new passioun;^o
With daggers gave him many a grievous wound;
40 Nailed him to a pillar, with pincers plucked him
doun.^o

SECOND HERALD

And sith^o they took that blessed bread so sound^o
And in a caldron they did him boil.
In a cloth full just^o they it wound,
And so they did^o him seethe in oil;

45 And then they put him to a new tormentry,^o
In an hot oven spered^o him fast.
There he appeared with wounds bloody;
The oven rove^o asunder and all to-brast.^o

FIRST HERALD

Thus in our law^o they were made steadfast;
The holy sacrament showed them great favor;
50 In contrition their hearts were cast
And went and showed their lives to a confessor.

Thus by miracle of the King of Heaven,
And by might and power given to the priest's
mouth,⁹
55 In a household were converted iwis^o eleven.¹
At Rome this miracle is known well couth.^o

SECOND HERALD

This miracle at Rome was presented, forsooth,
In the year of our Lord, a thousand four hundred
sixty and one,
That the Jews with holy sacrament did woth,
In the forest said of Aragon.

60

Lo, thus God at a time showed him there,
Through his mercy and his mickle might;
Unto the Jews he gan appear
That they should not lose his heavenly light.

FIRST HERALD

Therefore, friends, with all your might
Unto your ghostly father show your sin;
Be in no wanhope day nor night.
No manner of doubts that Lord put in.

65

For that the doubts the Jews then in stood—
As you shall see played, both more and less—
Was if the sacrament were flesh and blood;
Therefore they put it to such distress.

70

SECOND HERALD

And it please you, this gathering that here is,
At Croxton on Monday it shall be seen;
To see the conclusion of this little process
Heartily welcome shall you been.

75

Now Jesus you save from trei and teen,
To send us his high joys of heaven;
There might is without mind to mean.
Now, minstrel, blow up with a merry steven.

80

Explicit.

*Hereafter follows the Play of the Conversion of
Sir JONATHAS the Jew by Miracle of the Blessed
Sacrament.*

ARISTORIUS

Now Christ, that is our creator, from shame he cure
us;°

He maintains us with mirth that moves upon the
mold;°

Unto his endless joy mightily he restores us,
All those that in his name in peace well them hold;
For of a merchant most mighty thereof my tale is
told,

85

In Heraclea is none such, whoso will understand,
For of all Aragon I am most mighty of silver and of
gold—

For and it° were a country to buy, now would I not
wond.°

Sir Aristory is my name,

90

A merchant mighty of a royal array;°
Full wide in this world springs my fame,
Far kenned° and known, the sooth° for to say,
In all manner of lands, without any nay,°

My merchandise runs,° the sooth for to tell;

95

In Genoa and in Jenyse⁵ and in Geneway,°
In Syria and in Sheba and in Salerno I sell;

In Antioch and in Allemania° much is my might,

In Brabant and in Britain I am full° bold,

In Calabria and in Cologne there range I full right,°

100

In Dordrecht and in Denmark by the cliffs cold;°⁶

In Alexandria I have abundance in the wide world.

In France and in Faeroe° fresh be my flowers,

In Gelder° and in Galicia have I bought and sold,

In Hamburg and in Holland much merchandise is
ours;

105 In Jerusalem and in Jericho among the Jews gentle,
Among the Chaldeans and Catalans kenned is my
coming;

In Rheims and in Rome to Saint Peter's temple,
I am known certainly for buying and selling;

110 In Maine and in Milan full merry have I be;
Out of Navarre to Naples much good is that I
bring;

In Pondere and in Portugal much is my glee;
In Spain and in Spruce much is my speeding;
In Lombardy and in Luxembourg there led is my
liking;

115 In Tharsia and in Turkey there told is my tale;
And in the dukedom of Oryon much have I in
wielding;

And thus throughout all this world set is my sail.

No man in this world may wield more riches;
All I thank God of his grace, for he that me sent;
And as a lord's peer thus live I in worthiness.

120 My curate waits upon me to know my intent,
And men at my wielding, and all is me lent
My will for to work in this world so wide.

Me dare they not displease by no condescent.
And who so does, he is not able to abide.

PRIEST

125 No man shall you tarry nor trouble this tide,
But every man diligently shall do you pleasance;
And I unto my cunning to the best shall them guide
Unto God's pleasing to serve you to attrueaunce.

For you be worthy and notable in substance of good,
Of merchants of Aragon you have no peer—
130 And thereof thank God that died on the rood,
That was your maker and hath you dear.

ARISTORIUS

Forsooth, Sir Priest, your talking is good;
And therefore after your talking I will attain
To worship my God that died on the rood.
135 Never while that I live against that will I sayn.
But, Peter Paul, my clerk, I pray thee go well
plain
Throughout all Heraclea, that thou ne wond,
And wit if any merchant be come to this reign
Of Syria or of Sheba or of Chalcedon.
140

CLERK

At your will for to walk I will not say nay,
Smartly to go search at the water's side;
If any pleasant bargain be to your pay,
As swiftly as I can I shall him to you guide.
Now will I walk by these paths wide,
145 And seek the haven both up and down,
To wit if any uncouth ships therein do ride
Of Syria or of Sheba or of Chalcedon.

*Now shall the merchant's man withdraw himself,
and the Jew JONATHAS shall make his boast.*

JONATHAS

Now, almighty Machomet, mark in thy majesty,
Whose laws tenderly I have to fulfill,
150 After my death bring me to thy high see,

My soul for to save if it be thy will;
 For my intent is for to fulfill,
 As my glorious God thee to honor.
 To do against thy intent it should grue^o me ill,^o
 155 Or against thine law for to report.^o

For I thank thee highly that have me sent
 Gold, silver, and precious stones,
 And abundance of spices thou hast me lent,
 As I shall rehearse before you ones:^o
 160 I have amethysts, rich for the nones,^o
 And beryls that be bright of ble;^o
 And sapphire seemly,^o I may show you attones,^o
 And crystals clear for to see;

I have diamonds dearworthy to dress,^o
 165 And emeralds, rich I trow^o they be,
 Onyx and agates both more and less,
 Topaziouns,^o smaragdes^o of great degree,^o
 Pearls precious great plenty;
 Of rubies rich I have great renown;
 170 Crapaudes^o and chalcedonies seemly^o to see,
 And curious carbuncles here you find mown.^o

Spices I have both great and small
 In my ships, the sooth^o for to say,
 Ginger, licorice, and galingale,
 175 And figs fat to please you to pay;^o
 Pepper and saffron and spices small,
 And dates well dulcet^o for to dress,^o
 Almonds and rice, full every male,^o
 And raisins both more and less:
 180

Cloves, grains,^o and ginger green,
 Mace, mastic that might^o is,
 Cinnamon, sugar, as you may seen,^o

Long pepper and Indian licorice;
Oranges and apples of great aprice,^o
185 Pomegranates and many other spices,—
To tell you all I have now, iwis,^o
And much other merchandise of sundry spices.

Jew Jonathas is my name,
Jason and Jasdon they wait on my will,
190 Masphat and Malchus they do the same,
As you may know it is both right and skill.^o
I tell you all, by dale and by hill,
In Heraclea is none^o so much of might.^o
Wherefore you ought tenderly to tend me till,^o
195 For I am chief merchant of Jews, I tell you by right.

But Jason and Jasdon, a matter would I mean^o—
Marvelously it is meant^o in mind—
The belief of these Christian men is false, as I ween;
^o
200 For they believe in a cake—me^o think it is unkind.^o
And all they say how the priest doth it bind,^o
And by the might^o of his word makes it flesh and
blood—
And thus by a conceit^o they would make us blind—
And how that it should be he^o that died upon the
rood.^o

JASON
205 Yea, yea, master, a straw^o for tales!
That may not fall,^o in my beleve;^o
But might we it get once within our pales,¹
I trow^o we should soon after put it in a preve.^o

JASDON
Now, by Machomet so mighty, what you done

of meve,^o
I would I wist^o how that we might it get;
210 I swear by my great God, and else^o might I
not cheve^o
But^o wightly^o thereon would I be wreck.^o

MASPHAT

Yea, I dare say faithfully that their faith is false:
That was never he that on Calvary² was killed,
Or in bread for to be blood it is untrue als;^o
215 But yet with their wiles^o they would we were wild.
^o
_—

MALCHUS

Yea, I am mighty Malchus, that boldly am build;^o
That bread for to beat bigly^o am I bent.^o
Once out of their hands and^o it might be exiled,^o
220 To help cast it in care^o would I consent.

JONATHAS

Well, sirs, then keep counsel,^o I command you all,
And no word of all this be wist.^o
But let us walk to see Aristory's hall,
And afterward more counsel^o among us shall cast.
^o
225 With him to buy and to sell I am of power prest:^o
A bargain with him to make I will assay;^o
For gold and silver I am nothing aghast^o
But^o that we shall get that cake to our pay.^o

*Here shall Sir ISODER the priest speak unto Sir
ARISTORIUS, saying in this way to him; and
JONATHAS goes down off his stage.³*

PRIEST

230 Sir, by your leave,° I may no longer dwell;°
it is far past none,° it is time to go to church,
There to say my evensong,° forsooth as I you tell,
And sith° come home again, as I am wont to
werche.°

ARISTORIUS

235 Sir Isoder, I pray you° walk at your will,
For to serve God it is well done,
And sith° come again and you shall sup° your fill,
And walk then to your chamber° as ye are wont to
doon.°

*Here shall the merchant's men meet with the
Jews.*

JONATHAS

Ah! Peter Paul, good day and well i-met!
Where is thy master, as I thee pray?°

CLERK

240 Long from him have I not let°
Sith° I came from him, the sooth° for to say.
What tiding° with you, sir, I you pray,°
After my master that you do fraine?°
Have you any bargain that were to his pay?°
Let me have knowledge; I shall wit him to sayn.°

JONATHAS

245 I have bargains royal and rich
For a merchant with° to buy and sell;
In all this land is there none like°
Of° abundance of good,° as I will tell.

Here shall the CLERK go to Sir ARISTORIUS, saluting him thus:

CLERK

250 All hail, master, and well may you be!
Now tidings^o can I you tell:
The greatest merchant in all Surré^o
Is come with^o you to buy and sell:
This tale right well he me told.

255 Sir Jonathas is his name,
A merchant of right great fame;
He would sell you, without blame,
Plenty of cloth of gold.

ARISTORIUS

260 Peter Paul, I can thee thank!
I pray^o thee richly array^o my hall
As oweth^o for a merchant of the bank;
Let no default^o be found at all.

CLERK

265 Sickerly,^o master, no more there shall!
Stiffly^o about I think to steer,^o
Hastily to hang your parlor with pall,^o
As longeth^o for a lord's peer.

*Here shall the Jewish merchant and his men
come to the Christian merchant.*

JONATHAS

All hail, Sir Aristory, seemly^o to see,
The mightiest merchant of Aragon!
Of your welfare fain wit^o would we,

And to bargain with you this day am I boun.°

ARISTORIUS

270 Sir Jonathas, you be welcome unto my hall!
I pray you come up and sit by me,
And tell me what good° you have to sell,
And if any bargain made may be.

JONATHAS

I have cloth of gold, precious stones, and spices
plenty.
With you a bargain would I make.
275 I would barter with you in privy°
One little thing, that you will me it take⁴
Privily° in this stound;°
And I will sure° you by this light,
Never distrai° you day nor night,
280 But be sworn to you full right°
And give you twenty pound.

ARISTORIUS

Sir Jonathas, say° me for my sake,
What manner of merchandise is that you mean?

JONATHAS

285 Your God, that is full mighty, in a cake,
And this good° anon° shall you seen.°

ARISTORIUS

Nay, in faith, that shall not been.°
I will not for a hundred pound
To stand in fear my Lord to teen;°
290 And for so little a value in conscience to stand
bound.

JONATHAS

Sir, the intent is, if I might know or undertake^o
If that he were God almighty,^o
Of all my miss^o I will amends make,
And do him worship both day and night.

ARISTORIUS

Jonathas, truth I shall thee tell:
295 I stand in great doubt to do that dede,^o
To you that dear^o all for to sell.
I fear me that I should stand in drede.^o
For and^o I unto the church yede,^o
And priest or clerk might me aspy,^o
300 To the bishop they would go tell that dede
And appeach^o me of heresy.

JONATHAS

Sir, as for that, good shift^o may you make,
And, for a veil, to walk on a night
When priest and clerk to rest be take;^o
305 Then shall you be spied of no wight.^o

ARISTORIUS

Now say me, Jonathas, by this light!
What payment therefore would you me make?

JONATHAS

Forty pound, and pay it ful right,^o
Even for that Lord^o sake.
310

ARISTORIUS

Nay, nay, Jonathas, there again;^o
I would not for a hundred pound.

JONATHAS

Sir, here is your asking^o told^o plain,
I shall it tell^o in this stound.^o

315 Here is a hundred pounds, neither more nor less,
Of ducats^o good, I dare well say;
Tell^o it ere^o you from me pass;^o
Me thinketh it a royal array.^o

But first, I pray you, tell me this:
320 Of this thing when shall I have deliverance?^o

ARISTORIUS

Tomorrow betimes;^o I shall not miss;
This night therefore I shall make purveyance.^o

Sir Isoder he is now at church,
There saying his evensong,^o
325 As it is worship for to werche.^o
He shall soon come home, he will not be long,
His supper for to eat;
And when he is busked^o to his bed,
Right soon hereafter he shall be sped.^o
330 No speech among you there be spread;
To keep^o your tongues you not let.^o

JONATHAS

Sir, almighty Machomet be with you!
And I shall come again right soon.

ARISTORIUS

Jonathas, ye wot^o what I have said, and how
335 I shall walk for that we have to doon.^o

Here go the Jews away and the PRIEST comes home.

PRIEST

Sir, Almighty God may be your guide
And glad^o you whereso you rest!

ARISTORIUS

Sir, you be welcome home this tide.^o
Now, Peter, get us wine of the best.

CLERK

340 Sir, here is a draught^o of Romney red,^o
there is no better in Aragon,
And a loaf of light bread—
it is wholesome as sayeth the physician.⁵

ARISTORIUS

345 Drink up, Sir Isoder, and be of good cheer!
This Romney is good to go with to rest;
There is no preciouser far nor near,
For all wicked^o meats it will digest.

PRIEST

350 Sir, this wine is good at a taste,
And thereof have I drunk right well.
To bed to go thus have I caste,^o
Even straight after this merry meal.

Now, Sir, I pray to God send you good night.
For to my chamber now will I go.

ARISTORIUS

Sir, with you be God almight,
And shield you ever from your foe.
355

*Here shall ARISTORIUS call his clerk to his
presence.*

How, Peter! In thee is all my trust,
In especial^o to keep my counsel:^o
For a little way walk I must.
I will not be long; trust as I thee tell.
Now privily^o will I prove my pace,^o
360 My bargain this night for to fulfill.
Sir Isoder shall not know of this case,
For he hath often sacred,^o as it is skill.^o
The church key is at my will;
There is no thing that me shall tarry,^o
365 I will not abide^o by dale nor hill
Till it be wrought,^o by Saint Mary!

*Here shall he enter the church and take the
host.^o*

Ah! now have I all my intent;
Unto Jonathas now will I fare;^o
To fulfill my bargain have I meant,
370 For that money will amend^o my fare,^o
As thinketh me.^o
But now will I pass by these paths plain;^o
To meet with Jonathas I would fain.^o
Ah! yonder he comes in certain;^o
375 Me thinketh^o I him see.

Welcome, Jonathas, gentle^o and true,
For well and truly thou keep thine hour;
Here is the host, sacred new,^o
380 Now will I home to hall and bower.^o

JONATHAS

And I shall keep this trusty^o treasure
As I would do my gold and fee.^o
Now in this cloth I shall thee^o cover
That no wight^o shall thee see.

*Here shall ARISTORIUS go his way and JONATHAS
and his servants shall go to the table⁶ thus
saying:*

JONATHAS

385 Now, Jason and Jasdon, you be Jews gentle,^o
Masphat and Malchus, that mighty are in mind,
This merchant from the Christian temple
Has got us this bread that makes us thus blind.
Now, Jason, as gentle^o as ever was the lind,^o
390 Into the foresaid parlor privily^o take thy pace;^o
Spread a cloth on the table that you shall there
find,
And we shall follow after to carp of this case.^o

*Now the Jews go and lay the host on the table,
saying:*

JONATHAS

Sirs, I pray you all, hearken to my saw!^o
These Christian men carp^o of a marvelous case;^o
395 They say that this is Jesus that was attainted^o in our
law,⁷
And that this is he that crucified was.

On these words their law grounded hath he,
That he said on Shere Thursday⁸ at his supper:
He broke the bread and said "Accipite,"^o
400 And gave his disciples, them for to cheer:^o

And more he said to them there,
While they were all together and some,
Sitting at the table so clear,^o
"Comedite Corpus meum."^{o9}

405 And this power he gave Peter to proclaim,
And how the same should be sufficient^o to all
preachers;
The bishops and curates^o say the same,
And so, as I understood, do all his progenitors.^o

JASON

Yea, some men in that law rehearse^o another:
They say of a maiden^o borne was he,
410 And how Joachim's daughter^o should be his mother,
And how Gabriel appeared and said "Ave",^o
And with that word she should conceived be,^o
And that in her should alight the Holy Ghost.¹
Against our law this is false heresy,
415 And yet they say he is of might^os most.

JASDON

They say that Jesus to be our king,
But I ween^o he bought that full dear.^o
But they make a royal array^o of his uprising;^o
And that in every place is preached far and near.
420 And how he to his disciples again did appear,
To Thomas and to Mary Magdalene,²
And sith^o how he styed^o by his own power;
And this, you know well, is heresy full plain.

Masphat

425 Yea, and also they say he sent them wit and wisdom
For to understand every language;
When the Holy Ghost to them come,

They fared as drunk men of piment or vernage;^{o3}
And sithen^o how that he likened himself a lord of
peerage,^o
On his father's right hand he him set.
430 They hold him wiser than ever was sibyl^o sage,
And stronger than Alexander,⁴ that all the world did
get.

MALCHUS

Yea, yet they say as false, I dare lay^o my head,
How they that be dead shall come again to
judgment,
And our dreadful judge shall be this same bread,⁵
435 And how life everlasting them should be lent.
And thus they hold, all at one consent,^o
Because that Philip⁶ said for a little gloss^o—
To turn us from our belief is their intent—
For that he said, '*Judicare vivos et mortuos*.'⁷
440

JONATHAS

Now, sirs, you have rehearsed the substance of their
law,
But this bread I would^o might be put in a prefe,^o
Whether this be he that in Bozrah of us had awe.
There stained were his clothes, this may we
belefe;^{o8}

445 This may we know, there had he grief,
For our old books verify thus.
Thereon he was judged^o to be hanged as a thief—

*Tinctis Bosra vestibus.*⁹

JASON

If that this be he that on Calvary was made red,^o
450 Onto my mind, I shall ken you a conceit good:¹
Surely with our daggers we shall seize on this bread,
And so with clouts^o we shall know if he have any
blood.

JASDON

Now, by Machomet so mighty, that moveth
in my mood!^o
This is masterly meant,^o this matter thus to
move:^o
455 And with our strokes we shall fray^o him as he was
on
the rood,^o
That he was undone^o with great reproof.^o

MASPHAT

Yea, I pray^o you, smite^o you in the midst of the
cake,
And so shall we smite thereon wounds five.²
We will not spare to work it wrake,^o
460 To prove in this bread if there be any life.

MALCHUS

Yea, go to then, and take your space,^o
And look^o our daggers be sharp and keen:
And when each man a stroke smitten has,
In the middle part thereof our master^o shall been.
^o
^o

JONATHAS

465 When ye have all smitten,^o my stroke shall be
seen;
With this same dagger that is so stiff and strong,

In the midst of this print^o I think for to preen;^o
One lash^o I shall him lend ere^o it be long.

*Here shall the 4 Jews prick their daggers in 4
quarters, thus saying:*

JASON

Have at it! Have at it, with all my might!
This side I hope for to seize!
470

JASDON

And I shall with this blade so bright
This other side freshly afese!^o

MASPHAT

And I you plight^o I shall him not please,
For with this punch I shall him prick.

MALCHUS

And with this auger^o I shall him not ease,
475 Another buffet^o shall he lick.^o

JONATHAS

Now am I bold with battle him to bleike,^o
The middle part all for to preen;^o
A stout stroke also for to strike—
In the midst it shall be seen!
480

Here the host must bleed.

Ah! out! out! harrow!^o What devil is this?
Of this work I am in were;^o
It bleedeth as it were wood,^o iwis;^o
But if^o you help, I shall despair.

JASON

485 A fire! a fire! and that in haste!
 Anon^o a cauldron full of oil!

JASDON

 And I shalle help it were in cast,^o
 All the three hours for to boil!

MASPHAT

490 Yea, here is a furnace^o stout and strong,
 And a cauldron therein doth hong.^o
 Malchus, where are you so long,
 To help this deed were dight?^o

MALCHUS

495 Lo, here is four gallons of oil clear.
 Have done fast! blow up the fere!^o
 Sir, bring that ilk^o cake near,
 Manly^o with all your might.

JONATHAS

500 And I shall bring that ilk^o cake
 And throw it in, I undertake.^o
 Out! Out! it worketh me wrake!^o
 I may not avoid^o it out of my hand.
 I will go drench me^o in a lake.
 And in woodness I begin to wake!^o
 I run, I leap over this land!

Here he runs wood,^o with the host in his hand.

JASON

505 Run, fellows, run, for cock's pain,³
 Fast we had^o our master again!

Hold prestly^o on this plain^o
And fast bind him to a post.

JASDON

Here is a hammer and nails three, I say;
Lift up his arms, fellow, on hey,^o
While I drive these nails, I you pray,^o
510 With strong strokes fast.

MASPHAT

Now set on, fellows, with main^o and might,
And pluck his arms away in fight!
What if he twitch, fellows, aright!
515 Alas, bales^o breweth right bad!

*Here shall they pluck the arm, and the hand
shall hang still with the sacrament.*

MALCHAS

Alas, alas, what devil is this?
Now has he but one hand iwis!^o
Forsooth, master, right woe me is
That you this harme have had.

JONATHAS

There is no more; I must endure!
520 Now hastily to our chamber let us goon;^o
Till I may get me some recure;^o
And therefore charge^o you, everychoon,^o
That it be counsel^o what we have doon.^o

*Here shall the leech's man^o come into the place,
saying:*

COLLE

525 Aha! here is a fair fellowship,
Though I be not shapen, o I list o to slip: o
I have a master, I would he had the pip, o
I tell you in counsel. o
He is a man of all science
But o of thrift o—I may with you dispence! o
530 He sitteth with some tapster o in the spence: o
His hood o there will he sell.

Master Brundich of Braban, o
I tell you he is that same man,
Called the most famous physician
535 That ever saw urine. 4
He sees as well at noon as at night,
And sometimes by a candlelight
Can give a judgment aright—
As o he that hath no eyen. o
540

He is also a bone-setter;
I know no man go the better;
In every tavern he is debtor;
That is a good tokening. o
But ever I wonder he is so long; o
545 I fear there goes something a-wrong,
For he hath deserved to be hong o—
God send never worse tiding! o

He had a lady late in cure; o
I wot o by this she is full sure; o
550 There shall never Christian creature
Hear her tell no tale. 5
And o I stood here till midnight,
I could not declare aright o
My master's cunning insight—
555 That he has in good ale.

But what devil aileth him, so long to tarry!°
A sickman might soon miscarry.°
Now all the devils of hell him wary;°
God grante me my boon!°
560 I trow° best, we make a cry:°
If any man can him aspy°
Lead him to the pillory.°
In faith, it shall be done.

*Here shall he stand up and make proclamation,
saying this:*

COLLE
565 If there be either man or woman
That saw Master Brundich of Braban,
Or aught° of him tell can,
Shall well be quit° his meed;°
He has a cut beard and a flat nose,
A threadbare gown and a-rent° hose;
570 He speaks never good matter nor purpose;
To the pillory you him lead!

MASTER BRUNDICH

What, thou boy, what janglest° here?

COLLE

Ah! Master, master, but° to your reverence!°
I wend° never to a° seen your goodly cheer,°
575 You tarried hence so long.

MASTER BRUNDICH

What hast thou said in my absence?

COLLE

Nothing, master, but to your reverence^o
I have told all this audience—
And some lies among.

580

But, master, I pray you, how doth^o your patient
That you had last^o under your medicament?^o

MASTER BRUNDICH

I warrant she never feel annoyance.^o

COLLE

Why, is she in her grave?

MASTER BRUNDICH

I have given her a drink made full well
585 With scammony and with oxymel,^o
Lettuce, sage, and pimpernel.^o

COLLE

Nay, then she is full save!^o

For, now you are come, I dare well say
Between Dover and Calais the right^o way
590 Dwells none so cunning, by my fey,^{o6}
In my judgment.

MASTER BRUNDICH

Cunning? Yea, yea, and with practise;^o
I have saved many a man's life.

COLLE

On widows, maids, and wife
595 Your cunning you have nigh^o spent.^o

MASTER BRUNDICH

Where is my bowgett^o with drink profitable?^o

COLLE

Here master, master, ware^o how ye tug.^o

The devil I trow^o within shrug,^o

600 For it goes ribble-rabble.^o

MASTER BRUNDICH

Here is a great congregation,

And all be not whole,^o without negation;^o

I would have certification:

Stand up and make a proclamation.

605 Have do fast, and make no pausation,^o

But wightly^o make a declaration

To all people that help would have.

*Hic interim proclamacionem faciet.*⁷

COLLE

All manner of men that have any sickness,

To Master Brundich look that you redress.^o

610 What disease or sickness that ever you have,
He will never leave you till you be in your grave.

Who has the cancer, the colic, or the lax,^o

The tertian, the quartian,^o or the burning axs^o—

For worms, for gnawing, grinding in the wombe or in
the boldyro^o—

615 All manner red eyen,^o bleared^o eyen, and the
migraine also,

For headache, bone-ache, and thereto^o the
toothache—

The colt-evil, and the brosten men he will
undertake,⁸

All those that have the pose, the sneke, or the tisick⁹

—

Though a man were right hale,^o he could soon make
him sick.

620 Inquire to the coal-cote,^o for there is his lodging,
A little beside Babwell Mill,¹ if you will have
understanding.

MASTER BRUNDICH

Now, if there be either man or woman
That needeth help of a physician—

COLLE

625 Mary,² master, that I tell can,
And you will understand.

MASTER BRUNDICH

Knowest any^o about this place?

COLLE

Yea, that I do, master, so have I gras;^o
Here is a Jew, hight^o Jonathas,
Hath lost his right hand.

MASTER BRUNDICH

630 Fast to him I would inquire.

COLLE

For^o God, master, the gate is here.

MASTER BRUNDICH

Then to him I will go near.
My master, well may you be!

JONATHAS

What doost^o here, fellow? what wouldst thou han?^o

MASTER BRUNDICH

635 Sir, if you need any surgeon or physician,
Of your disease help you well I can,
What hurts or harms so-ever they be.

JONATHAS

640 Sir, thou art untaught^o to come in thus homely,^o
Or to appear in my presence thus malapertly.^o
Voideth^o from my sight, and that wightly,^o
For you be misadvised.

COLLE

Sir, the hurt of your hand is knowen full rife,^o
And my master has saved many a man's life.

JONATHAS

645 I trow^o you be come to make some strife.
Hence^o fast, lest that you be chastised.

COLLE

Sir, you know well it cannot miss;
Men that be masters of science be profitable.^o
In a pot if it please you to piss,
He can tell if you be curable.

JONATHAS

650 Avoid,^o fellows, I love not your babble!
Brush them hence both, and that anon!
Give them their reward that^o they were gone!

*Here shall the 4 Jews beat away the leech^o and
his man._u*

JONATHAS

Now have done, fellows, and that anon,^o
For doubt of dread^o what after befall!
I am near mazed,_u my wit is gone;
655 Therefore of help I pray^o you all.

And take your pincers that are so sure,
And pluck out the nails one and one;
Also in a cloth you it³ cure^o
And throw it in the cauldron, and that anon.
660

*Here shall JASON pluck out the nails and shake
the hand into the cauldron.*

JASON

And I shall rape me^o readily anon
To plucke out the nails that stand so fast,
And bear this bread and also this bone
And into the cauldron I will it cast.

JASDON

And I shall with this dagger so stout
665 Push it down that it might plaw,^o
And stir the cloth round about
That nothing thereof shall be raw.

MASPHAT

And I shall manly,_u with all my might,
670 Make the fire to blaze and brinne,^o
And set there-under such a light
That it shall make it right thin.

Here shall the cauldron boil, appearing to be as blood.

MALCHAS

Out and harrow!° what devil is herein?
All this oil waxeth° red as blood,
And out of the cauldron it begins to rin.°
675 I am so afraid I am near wood.°

*Here shall JASON and his company go to SIR
JONATHAS, saying:*

JASON

Ah! master, master, what cheer is with you?°
I cannot see our work will avail;°
I beseech you advance° you now
Somewhat with your counsail.°
680

JONATHAS

The best counsel that I now wot,°
That I can deem,° far and near,
Is to make an oven as red hot
As ever it can be made with fere;°
And when you see it so hot appear,
685 Then throw it° into the oven fast—
Soon shall he staunch° his bleeding cheer.°
When you have done, stop it°—be not aghast!°

JASDON

By my faith, it shall be wrought,°
And that anon, in great hast.°
690 Bring on firing, sirs, hear ye not?
To heat this oven be not aghast.

MASPHAT

Here is straw and thorns keen:°

Come on, Malchas, and bring on fere,
For that shall heat it well, I wene;°

695

Here they kindle the fire.

Blow on fast, that° done it were!

MALCHAS

Ah, how this fire ginneth° to burn clear!°

This oven right hot I think to make.

Now, Jason, to the cauldron that ye stere°
And fast fetch hither that ilk° cake.

700

*Here shall JASON go to the cauldron and take out
the host with his pincers and cast it into the
oven.*

JASON

I shall with these pincers without doubt,

Shake this cake out of this cloth,

And to the oven I shall it rout°

And stop° him there, though he be loth.°

The cake I have caught here in good sooth°—

705

The hand is sodden,° the flesh from the bones—

Now into the oven I will therewith.

Stop° it, Jasdon, for the nones!°

JASDON

I stop this oven, without doubt,

With clay I clome° it up right fast,

710

That none heat shall come out.

I trow° there shall he° heat and dry in hast!°

*Here the oven must rive asunder^o
and bleed out at the crannies,^o
and an image appear out, with wounds
bleeding.*

MASPHAT

Out! out! here is a great wonder!
This oven bleedeth out on every side!

MALCHAS

715 Yea, the oven in pieces ginneth^o to rive asunder;
This is a marvelous case this tide.^o

*Here shall the image speak to the Jews, saying
thus:*

JESUS

*O mirabiles Judei, attendite et videte
Si est dolor sicut dolor meus.⁴*

Oh you marvelous Jews,
Why are you to your king unkind,
720 And I so bitterly bought^o you to my bliss?
Why fare^o you thus foul with your friend?
Why pain you me and straightly me pinned,^o
And I your love so dearly have bought?
Why are you so unsteadfast in your mind?
725 Why wrath you^o me? I grieve you not.
Why will you not believe that^o I have taught,
And forsake your foul negligence,
And keep my commandments in your thought,
And unto my godhead to take credence?^o
730
Why blaspheme you me? Why do you thus?

Why put you me to a new tormentry,^o
And I died for you on the cross?
Why consider not you what I did cry?^o
While that I was with you, you did me villainy.
735 Why remember you not my bitter chance,^o
How your kin did me advance^o
For claiming of my inheritance?
I showed you the straightness^o of my grievance,
740 And all to move you to my mercy.

JONATHAS

*Tu es protector vite mee; a quo trepidabo?*⁵
O thou, Lord, which art my defender,
For dread of thee I tremble and quake.
Of thy great mercy let us receive the shower;
And meekly I ask mercy, amends to make.
745
*Here shall they kneel down all on their knees,
saying:*

JASON

Ah! Lord, with sorrow and care and great weeping
All we fellows, let us say thus,
With condolent^o heart and great sorrowing:
*Lacrimis nostris conscienciam nostram baptizemus!*⁶

JASDON

750 Oh thou blessed Lord of mickle^o might,
Of thy great mercy, thou hast showed us the path,
Lord, out of grievous sleep and out of darkness to
light,
*Ne gravis sompnus irruat.*⁷

MASPHAT

Oh Lord, I was very cursed, for I would know thy
creed.

755 I can no means make^o but cry to thee thus:
O gracious Lord, forgive me my misdeed!
With lamentable^o heart: *miserere mei, Deus!*⁸

MALCHAS

Lord, I have offended thee in many a sundry^o
vice,
That sticketh^o at my heart as hard as a core.
760 Lord, by the water of contrition let me arise:
*Asparges me, Domine, ysopo, et mundabor.*⁹

JESUS

All you that desire my servants for to be
And to fulfill the precepts of my laws,
The intent of my commandment know ye:
765 *Ite et ostendite vos sacerdotibus meis.*¹
To all you that desire in any wise^o
To ask mercy, to grant it ready I am.
Remember and let your wits suffice,
*Et tunc non avertam a vobis faciem meam.*²

770 Now, Jonathas, in thine hand thou art but lame,
And is through thine own cruelty.
For thine hurt thou mayest thyself blame,
Thou wouldest prove thy power me to oppress;
But now I consider thy necessity;^o
775 Thou wastest thine hart with great contrition;
Go to the cauldron—thy care shall be the less—
And touch thine hand to thy salvation.

*Here shall SIR JONATHAS put his hand into the
cauldron, and it shall be whole again, and then
say as follows:*

JONATHAS

Oh thou, my Lord God and Savior, hosanna!°
Thou King of Jews and of Jerusalem!
O thou mighty strong Lion of Judah,
780 Blessed be the time that thou were in Bethlehem!
Oh thou mighty, strong, glorious, and gracious oil
stream,
Thou mighty conqueror of infernal tene,°
I am quit° of much cumbrance° through thy
mean,°
785 That ever blessed may thou been!°

Alas, that ever I did against thy will,
In my wit° to be so wood°
That I so ungoodly work should so grill!°
Against my misgovernance thou gladdest° me with
good:
I was so proud to prove° thee on the rood,°
790 And thou hast sent me lighting° that late° was lame;
To beat thee and boil thee I was mighty° in mood,
And now thou hast put° me from duress and
disfame.°

But, Lord, I take my leave at thy high presence,
And put me in thy mighty mercy;
795 The bishop will I go fetch to see our offence,
And unto him show our life, how that we be guilty.

*Here shall the master Jew go to the bishop, and
his men kneel still.*

JONATHAS

Hail, father of grace! I kneel upon my knee,
Heartily beseeching you and interely,°
A swemful° sight all for to see
800 In my house appearing verily:°

The holy sacrament, the which we have done
tormentry,^o
And there we have put him to a new passion,^o
A child appearing with wounds bloody:
A swemful sight it is to look upon.
805

EPISCOPUS

Oh Jesus, Lord, full of goodness!
With thee will I walk with all my might.
Now, all my people, with me you dress^o
For to go see that swemful^o sight.
810 Now, all you people that here are,
I command you, every man,
On your feet for to go bare,
In the devoutest wise^o that you can.

*Here shall the bishop enter into the Jews' house
and say:*

*O Jhesu fili Dei,*³
815 How this painful passion^o rancheth^o my heart!
Lord, I cry to thee, *miserere mei,*^o
From this rueful sight^o thou will revert.^o
Lord, we all with sorrows smart,^o
For this unlawful work we live in languor;^o
820 Now, good Lord, in thy grace let us be girt,^o
And of thy sovereign mercy send us thy succor;^o
And for thy holy grace forgive us our error.
Now let thy pity spring and spread;
Though we have been unrightful,^o forgive us our
rigor,^o
825 And of our lamentable^o hearts, good Lord, take
heed.

Here shall the image change again into bread.

EPISCOPUS

Oh thou largifluent^o Lord, most of lightness,^o
Unto our prayers thou hast applied:^o
Thou hast received them with great sweetness,
For all our dreadful deeds thou hast not us denied.
Full mickle^o ought thy name for to be magnified
830 With mansuete mirth^o and great sweetness,
And as our gracious God for to be glorified,
For thou showest us great gladness.

Now will I take this holy sacrament
With humble heart and great devotion,
835 And all we will go with one consent^o
And bear it to church with solemn procession;

Now follow me, all and some,
And all those that be here, both more and less,
840 This holy song, *O sacrum Convivium*,⁴
Let us sing all with great sweetness.

Here shall the PRIEST, SIR ISODER, *ask his master
what this means.*

PRIEST

Sir Aristory, I pray^o you, what meaneth all this?
Some miracle, I hope, is wrought^o by God's might;
The bishop comes in procession with a great many^o
of Jews;
I hope some miracle is showed to his sight.
845 To church in haste will I run full right,^o
For thither, me think,^o he begins to take his pace.^o
The sacrament so seemly^o is borne in sight,
I hope that God hath showed of his grace.

ARISTORIUS

850 To tell you the truth I will not let:°
Alas that ever this deed was dight!°
An unlawful bargain I began for to beat;°
I sold yon same Jews our Lord full right
For covetise of good,° as a cursed wight.°
Woe the while° that bargain I did ever make!
855 But° you be my defender in our diocesan's° sight,
For a heretic I fear he will me take.

PRIEST

For sooth, nothing well-advised was your wit;°
Wonderly° was it wrought of° a man of discretion
In such peril your soul for to pit;°
860 But I will labor for your absolution.°

Let us hie° us fast, that we were hence,
And beseech him of his benign grace
That he will show us his benevolence
To make a means° for your trespass.
865

*Here shall the merchant and his priest go to the
church, and the bishop shall enter the church
and lay the host on the altar, saying thus:*

BISHOP

*Estote fortes in bello et pugnate cum antico
serpente,
Et accipite regnum eternum, et cetera.*⁵

My children, you be strong in battle ghostly°
For to fight against the fell° serpent,
That night and day is ever busy;
870 To destroy our souls is his intent.
Look you be not slow nor negligent
To arm you in the virtues seven;⁶

Of sins forgotten take good advisement,^o
And acknowledge them to your confessor full even;^o
875

For that serpent, the devil, is full^o strong,
Marvelous mischiefs for man to mean;^o
But^o that the Passion of Christ is meant us among,^o
And that is in despite of his^o infernal teen.^o
Beseech our Lord and Savior so keen^o
880 To put down that serpent, cumberer^o of man,
To withdraw his furious froward^o doctrine bidene,^o
Fulfilled of the fiend called Leviathan.⁷

Give laurel^o to that Lord of might
That he may bring us to the joyous fruition,^o
885 From us to put the fiend to flight,
That never he destroy us by his temptation.

PRIEST

My father under God, I kneel unto your knee,
In your mighty misericord^o to take us in
remembrance,
As you be material^o to our degree.^o
890 We put us in your moderate ordinance,^o
if it like^o your highness to hear our grievance:^o
We have offended sorrowfully in a sin mortal,
Wherefore^o we fear us our Lord will take
vengeance
For our sins both great and small.
895

BISHOP

And in fatherhead that longeth to my dignity,⁸
Unto your grief I will give credence.^o
Say what you will, in the name of the Trinity,
Against God if you have wrought^o any
inconvenience.^o

ARISTORIUS

900 Holy father, I kneel to you under benedicite.o
I have offended in the sin of covetise:o
I sold our Lord's body for lucre of moneyo
And delivered to the wicked with cursed advice.o
And for that presumption greatly I agriseo
905 That I presumed to go to the altar
There to handle the holy sacrifice—
I were worthy to be put in burning fire.

But, gracious lord, I cano no more
Buto put me to God's mercy and to your grace:
910 My cursed works for to restore,o
I ask penance now in this place.

BISHOP

Now for this offence that thou hast done
Against the King of Heaven and Emperor of Hell,
Ever while thou livest good deeds for to doneo
And nevermore for to buy nor sell:
915 Chastise thy body as I shall thee tell,
With fasting and praying and other good work,
To withstand the temptation of fiends of Hell;
And to call to God for grace look thou never be irk.o

920 Also, thou priest, for thy negligence,
That thou were no wiser in thine office,
Thou art worthyo imprisonment for thine offence;
But beware ever hereafter and be more wise.

And all you creatureso and curateso that here be,
Of this deed you may take example
925 How that your pyxes⁹ locked ye should see,
And beware of the key of God's temple.

JONATHAS

And I ask Christendom with great devotion,
With repentant heart in all degrees,
930 I ask for us all a general absolution.

Here the Jews must kneel all down.

For that we kneel all upon our knees;
For we have grieved^o our Lord on ground^o
And put him to a new painful passion:
With daggers stuck him with grievous wound,
935 New^o nailed him to a post and with pincers
plucked him down.

JASON

And sith^o we took that blessed bread so sound^o
And in a cauldron we did him boil,
In a cloth full just^o we him wound
And so did we see the him in oil.

JASDON

940 And for that^o we might not overcome him with
tormentry,^o
In an hot oven we spered^o him fast,
There he appeared with wounds all bloody:
The oven rave^o asunder and all to-brast.^o

MASPHAT

945 In his law to make us steadfast,
There spoke he to us words of great favor;
In^o contrition our hearts he cast^o
And bade take us^o to a confessor.

MALCHUS

And, therefore, all we with one consent^o

950 Kneel unto your high sovereignty,
For to be christened^o is our intent;
Now all our deeds to you showed have we.

*Here shall the BISHOP christen the Jews with
great solemnity.*

BISHOP

Now the Holy Ghost at this time may you bless
As ye kneel all now in his name,
And with the water of baptism I shall you bless
To save you all from the fiend's blame.
955 Now that fiend's power for to make lame,
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Ghost,
To save you from the devil's flame,
I christen you all, both least and most.

JONATHAS

960 Now our father and bishop that we well know,
We thank you interly,^o both least and most.
Now are we bound to keep Christ's law
And to serve the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Ghost.
Now will we walk by country and coast,
Our wicked living for to restore:^o
965 And trust in God, of mights^o most,
Never to offend as we have done before.

Now we take our leave at less and more—
Forward on our voyage we will us dress;^o
970 God send you all as good welfare
As heart can think or tongue express.

ARISTORIUS

Into my county now will I fare
For to amend my wicked life,
And to keep the people out of care^o
I will teach this lesson to man and wife.
975
Now take I my leave in this place,
I will go walk my penance to fulfill;
Now, God, against whom I have done this trespass,
Grant me forgiveness if it be thy will!

PRIEST

For joy of this me think^o my heart does weep,
980 That you have given you^o all Christ's servants to
be,
And him for to serve with heart full meek—
God, full of patience and humility—
And the conversion of all these fair men,
With hearts steadfastly knit in one,
985 God's laws to keep and him to serve bidene,^o
As faithful Christians evermore for to gone.^o

BISHOP

God Omnipotent evermore look you serve
With devotion and prayer while that you may;
Doubt it not he will you preserve
990 For each good prayer that you say to his pay;^o
And therefore in every due^o time, look you not
delay
For to serve the Holy Trinity,
And also Mary, that sweet may,^o
And keep you in perfect love and charity.
995
Christ's commandments ten there be;¹
Keep well them; do as I you tell.

Almighty God shall you please in every degree,
And so shall you save your souls from Hell.
For there is pain and sorrow cruel,
1000 And in heaven there is both joy and bliss,
More than any tongue can tell,
There angels sing with great sweetness;

To the which bliss he bring us
Whose name is called Jesus,
1005 And in worship of this name glorious
To sing to his honor *Te Deum Laudamus*.²

Finis^o

*Thus endeth the Play of the Blessed Sacrament,
which miracle was done in the forest of Aragon,
in the famous city Heraclea, the year of our Lord
God 1461, to whom be honor. Amen.*

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is drawn from the edition prepared for the Early English Text Society from the sole manuscript of the play (at Trinity College, Dublin). Here, spelling within the text has been modernized wherever such a change does not interfere with sense or meter. Notes have been prepared in consultation with later editions as well, including that of John T. Sebastian (Middle English Text Series, 2012).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This list of characters actually appears at the end of the manuscript, rather than the beginning.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The fact that nine actors ("players") are recommended for twelve characters indicates the doubling of some parts.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: These are presumably the initials of the otherwise unknown scribe of the play-text.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Before the play itself begins, the manuscript includes an announcement script for advertising the play; it would have been used to publicly promote the production and attract spectators.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: This line suggests that a pantomime of the play's action may have accompanied the pronouncement of the banns.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An imaginary city, here conceived to be in Aragon (a kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "For the nones" (literally, "for the occasion") is a formula often used to fill lines in Middle English rhyming verse.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A reference to the priest's power to consecrate bread, effecting its transformation into the body of Christ, according to the beliefs of the Western Church.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It is not clear why "eleven" appears here; only five Jews are converted in the course of the play.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Hold the Lord in no kind of doubt.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Where power is beyond the ability of the mind to recount.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This concluding line suggests that a musical performance followed the proclamation.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Unidentified.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The quasi-alphabetical order of this list suggests Aristotiles's encyclopedic command over the world.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Unidentified.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Unidentified.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A widespread Christian misspelling of "Muhammad," here erroneously invoked to name the god that the Jews supposedly worship.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: If we could get it (the Eucharistic bread) once within our precincts (that is, our control).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The site of Jesus's crucifixion.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This stage direction refers to one of three small stages or scaffoldings that would have been constructed around a

central performance space. Jonathas departs from one stage, which represents the Jews' lodgings. The other two stages represent Aristorius's home and the local church, respectively.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: For one little thing that you will bring to me.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Bread and wine are the foodstuffs transformed into the Eucharist by the priest's consecration. This meal is a profane version of the sacrament.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A table on the scaffolding that represents Jonathas's lodgings. The table evokes the altar on which a priest consecrates the Eucharist.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, Jewish law; Jonathas here repeats the common false accusation that Jews are responsible for Christ's punishment and death.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Holy Thursday, the day immediately before the Crucifixion, when Jesus presided over the Last Supper, the biblical event at the root of the Eucharistic sacrament. See Matthew 26:26–28, Mark 14:22–24, and Luke 22:19–20.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Latin phrases in this speech are part of the ritual for consecrating the Eucharistic bread and wine.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The archangel Gabriel informs Mary, a virgin, that she will give birth to Jesus; see Luke 1:26–35.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Two of Jesus's followers, who meet him after his resurrection; see John 20.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This describes the events of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus's apostles; see Acts 2.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The conqueror Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Christ (whose body constitutes the Eucharistic wafer) is supposed to judge the resurrected souls at the Last Judgment.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The reference is uncertain.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: To judge the living and the dead (Latin); echoing 2 Timothy 4:1 and 1 Peter 4:5. All translations in the notes are from Latin.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An allusion to Isaiah 63:1, which Christians interpreted as a prophecy of Christ.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: With dyed garments of Bozrah (Isaiah 63:1).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: As I recall, I shall make known to you a good trick.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Christ on the Cross is said to have had five wounds.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: For God's pain (a medieval oath).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Medieval physicians often based diagnoses on urine samples.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Colle implies that the patient has died.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The joke is that between Dover and Calais is nothing but the English Channel, where no one dwells.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Here meanwhile he will make a proclamation.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The disease of the penis and "burst men" (suffering from hernias) he will take under his care.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: All those who have congestion, a head cold, or tuberculosis.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Babwell, outside Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, was the location of a medieval mill.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "By the Virgin Mary!" (a mild oath).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The detached hand, still joined with the Eucharistic host.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "O astonishing Jews, attend and see / If any sorrow be like to my sorrow." These lines echo the Holy Saturday church service.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: You are the protector of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (see Psalm 27:1 [Vulgate 26:1]).[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: With our tears, let us baptize our conscience (source unknown).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: May grievous sleep not seize [us] (from a Christian liturgical hymn).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Have mercy on me, God (Psalm 51:1 [Vulgate 50:3]).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop [an herb], Lord, and I shall be cleansed (Psalms 51:7 [Vulgate 50:9]).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Go and show yourselves to my priests (see Luke 17:14).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: And then I will not turn away my face from you (see Psalm 143:7 [Vulgate 142:7]).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: O Jesus, son of God.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: O holy Feast (from a liturgical hymn celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi—literally, “God’s Body”). It is likely that the theatrical audience would have become part of the procession.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Be strong in war, and fight with the ancient serpent, / And receive the eternal kingdom, etc. (from a liturgical hymn).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The four natural or cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice) plus the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A sea monster or sea serpent that is God’s enemy; see Isaiah 27:1 and Job 41:1–9 (Vulgate 40:20–28).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: And with the spiritual authority that belongs to my office.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Containers for holding the consecrated host in the church.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The Ten Commandments appear in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “We Praise You, God” (the title of a popular hymn).[Return to reference 2](#)

Notes

- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worthy ones*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely committed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plan*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *masters, if it pleases*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dwells* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *known* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wealth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who dwells* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Syria*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *asked urgently*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *offer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to speak*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the delivery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *befell* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *event*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harmed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on earth*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wholesome*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tightly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *locked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *split* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *smashed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *religion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very well*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aforesaid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *despair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *play*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pain and suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *song*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Here ends (the banns)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *let him protect us*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who move upon earth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if there* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hesitate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recognized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dissent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *circulates*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: Geneva [Return to reference](#) °
- °: Germany [Return to reference](#) °
- °: very [Return to reference](#) °
- °: move about freely [Return to reference](#) °
- °: the Faeroe Islands [Return to reference](#) °
- °: Gelderland [Return to reference](#) °
- °: noble [Return to reference](#) °
- °: known [Return to reference](#) °
- °: area of France [Return to reference](#) °
- °: been [Return to reference](#) °
- °: Prussia [Return to reference](#) °
- °: achievement [Return to reference](#) °
- °: pleasure [Return to reference](#) °
- °: command [Return to reference](#) °
- °: wealth [Return to reference](#) °
- °: honor [Return to reference](#) °
- °: clerk [Return to reference](#) °
- °: command [Return to reference](#) °
- °: in no way [Return to reference](#) °
- °: remain [Return to reference](#) °
- °: delay [Return to reference](#) °
- °: time [Return to reference](#) °
- °: please you [Return to reference](#) °
- °: to the best my ability [Return to reference](#) °
- °: at your command [Return to reference](#) °
- °: amount of wealth [Return to reference](#) °
- °: Cross [Return to reference](#) °
- °: holds [Return to reference](#) °
- °: in truth [Return to reference](#) °
- °: according to [Return to reference](#) °
- °: strive [Return to reference](#) °
- °: speak [Return to reference](#) °
- °: ask [Return to reference](#) °
- °: completely [Return to reference](#) °
- °: delay [Return to reference](#) °
- °: learn [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *realm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *briskly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *benefit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harbor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unknown*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distinguished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carefully*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throne*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disturb* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *badly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speak*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for the occasion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *color*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pretty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *adorn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *topazes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *emeralds* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quality*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toadstones* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lovely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very sweet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for serving*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bag*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grains of paradise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *see*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quality*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *powerful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attentively to attend to me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discuss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unnatural*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *control*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *power*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(Jesus)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(something worthless)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to the test*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have spoken of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish I knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *otherwise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boldly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tricks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confused*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greatly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inclined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *removed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make it suffer*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *keep secret*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *known*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discussion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *we consider*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attempt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hesitant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as we wish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *permission* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about 3 p.m.*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evening liturgical service*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *usually do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask you to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *usually do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *left*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *benefit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know what to say to him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with whom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concerning* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Syria*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *ask* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decorate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is proper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lack* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boldly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(fine cloth)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is proper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *praiseworthy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goods* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *privacy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to constrain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *these goods* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *see* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anger* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understand* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *almighty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misdeeds* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *danger* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *see* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accuse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stratagems* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *have gone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by no person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Lord's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *contrarily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *request* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *count* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(gold coins)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *count* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *depart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *display*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delivery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *early*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *evening liturgical service*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *good to do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(asleep)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hold* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fail*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comfort*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drink* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweet Greek wine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unhealthy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decided*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *privacy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test my step*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consecrated* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *fitting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pause*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Eucharistic wafer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improve* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *open*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be glad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *newly consecrated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *valued*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(addressing the host)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *linden tree*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreetly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *steps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discuss this situation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen to my speech*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *talk* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fantastical situation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condemned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Take (Lat.)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comfort*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Eat my Body (Lat.)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appropriate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *priests*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *successors*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *relate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virgin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(Mary)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Hail (Lat.)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *become pregnant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *powers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *paid dearly for that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *display* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *resurrection*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ascended*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(sweet wines)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nobleman*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *oracle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wager*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commentary*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to a test*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condemned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(bloody)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who works on my mind*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *masterfully planned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *execute*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attack* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroyed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shame*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *invite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strike*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do it harm*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *positions*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make sure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(our master's stroke)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *struck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *impression* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stab*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boldly terrify*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(carpenter's tool)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frighten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stab*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(exclamation of distress)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crazed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(help throw in the host)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fireplace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so this deed were done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *courageously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *endeavor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *does me harm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *release*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drown myself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I begin to go mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *quickly to have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *firmly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ground*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strength*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *troubles*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *swear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *everyone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *physician's servant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inclined* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(a disease)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosperity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excuse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barmaid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cellar*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sign of being a physician*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Brabant (a Flemish realm)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just like* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sign*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delayed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hung*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recently in his care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secure*[Return to reference](#) °

- ◦: *if* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *describe properly* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *delay* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *die* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *curse* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *request* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *think it* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *proclamation* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *see* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *(place of punishment)* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *anything* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *paid* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *reward* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *torn* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *what do you chatter about* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *only* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *honor* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *thought* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *have* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *face* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *praise* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *fares* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *recently* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *medical care* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *discomfort* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *(medical substances)* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *(common flowering plant)* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *fully cured* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *direct* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *faith* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *practice* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *nearly* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *exhausted* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *bag* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *healing* [Return to reference](#) ◦
- ◦: *beware* [Return to reference](#) ◦

- °: *guzzle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moves about*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rattles*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healthy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *address yourself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *diarrhea*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(kinds of fever)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aches*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unidentified body part*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inflamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healthy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coal shed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anyone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are you doing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *impolite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *familiarly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rudely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *depart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very widely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go hence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beneficial*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *depart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *physician* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *servant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for fear of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stunned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cover*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hasten myself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boldly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(exclamations of distress)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *becomes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *run*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *how are you?*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *succeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *come forward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the hand with host)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stop* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plug the oven* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *haste*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharp*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begins* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brightly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stir*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throw*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *trap* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unwilling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boiled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plug* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for the occasion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plaster* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the host)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *break apart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cracks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begins* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forcefully tormented me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are you angry with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proclaim* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help (to my death)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *severity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *contrite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take no action* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lamenting* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *varied* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strikes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *need* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(exclamation of praise)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *free* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *difficulty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mind* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thus commit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comfort* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Cross* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *relief* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recently* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrogant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kept* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reproach* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sincerely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *piteous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tortured* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prepare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mournful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *manner* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tears* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have mercy on me (Lat.)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turn back* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharp* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clothed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unrighteous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cruelty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrowful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splendor* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *complied*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very much*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gentle joy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I think* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *steps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splendid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *refrain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strike*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greed of wealth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *man*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bishop's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reasoning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unbelievably* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thrust*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forgiveness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hurry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intercede*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consideration*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *precisely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intended*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for us*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the devil's)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *malice*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *bold*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tempter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deviant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *completely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fulfillment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mercy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *necessary* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *authority*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for this reason*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trust*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *offense*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blessing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *monetary gain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plan*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shudder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *can do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deserving of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *created ones* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *priests*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pained* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on earth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *newly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flawless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very tightly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *torture*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *locked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burst*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordered us to take ourselves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *baptized*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wholeheartedly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *powers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I think*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yourselves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *completely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *liking*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suitable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maiden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *The end (Latin)*[Return to reference](#) °

Literature of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

SIR ORFEO

ca. 1300

Sir Orfeo is a reworking of the tragic classical myth of Orpheus and his wife, Eurydice. When Eurydice died of a snake bite, Orpheus followed her to the underworld. Having so pleased Pluto and Proserpina with his music, Orpheus was granted Eurydice's release, on condition he not look back to his wife as she followed him from Hades. Orpheus did look back, and so lost his wife. The medieval narrative evokes this tragedy to replace it with the comedy of reunification, not only of husband and wife but also of king and subjects. Orfeo's abdication, his entry into the forest and the underworld, his charming of the fairy kingdom with his music: all permit the rescue of his paralyzed, lacerated wife, Eurydice, and their joyful return home, in a perfect romance ending (see, on the romance genre, [pp. 141–42](#)).

The poem was probably translated from a French romance of the kind called a Breton lay, much like those of Marie de France (see [pp. 159–90](#)). The English translation was likely made before 1300, but it has survived in only three manuscripts of later date. Some scholars believe that the best of these, the Auchinleck manuscript, might once have been read by Chaucer, whose *Franklin's Tale* is also a Breton lay.

The text presented here is flexibly based on the Auchinleck manuscript. The metrical form is the four-stress couplet, the standard English form used to translate French octosyllabic couplets.

Sir Orfeo¹

We reden oft and finden ywrite^o—
As these clerkes doon^o us wite^o—
The layes^o that been of harping²
Been yfound^o of freely^o thing.
Some been of war and some of woe,
5 And some of joy and mirth also,
And some of treachery and of guile;
And some of haps^o that fellen^o while,^o
And some of bourds^o and ribaldry,
And many been of faïrye.³
10 Of alle thing that men may see,
Most of love forsooth they be.
In Britain^o these lays been wrought,
First yfound^o and forth ybrought.
Of adventures that felle by days^o
15 The Britons^o thereof maden layes:
When they might owher^o yheere^o
Of any marvels that there were,
They taken them their harpes with game,^o
Maden layes and yaf^o them name.
20 Of adventures that han befall
I can some telle, but not all.
Herkneth,^o lordings^o that been trewe,
I will you tell of Sir Orfewe.
Orfeo was a riche^o king,
25 In Engelond an high lording,
A stalworth^o man and hardy bo,^o
Large^o and courteous he was also,
His father was come of King Pluto,
And his mother of King Juno,^o
30

That sometime were as gods yholde^o
For adventures that they did and tolde.

35 This king sojourned in Traciens^o
That is a city of noble defence^o
(For Winchester was cleped^o tho^o
Traciens withouten no^o).
Orfeo most of any thing
Loved the glee^o of harping:
Siker^o was every good harpour
Of him to have much honour.
40 Himself he lerned for to harpe,
And laid^o thereon his wittes sharpe;^o
He lerned so there nothing was
A better harpour in no plas.^o
45 In all the world was no man bore^o
That once Orfeo sat before,
And^o he might of his harping hear,
But he should thinke that he were
In one of the joys of Paradis,
Such melody in his harping is.
50 Orfeo had a queen of pris^o
That was ycleped^o Dame Heurodis,
The fairest lady for the nones^o
That might goon^o on body and bones,
Full of love and of goodnesse—
55 But no man may tell her fairnesse.
Befell so, the comsing^o of May,
When merry and hot is the day,
And away been winter showres,
And every field is full of flowres,
60 And blossom breme^o on every bough
Overall wexeth^o merry enough,
This eche^o queen Dame Heurodis
Took with her two maids of pris^o
And wente in the undertide^o
65 To playe in an orchard-side,

To see the flowers spread and springe
 And to hear the fowles singe.
 They setten them^o down alle three
 Faire^o under an impe-tree;^o
 70 And well soon this faire queen
 Fell on sleep upon the green.
 The maidens durste^o her not awake,
 But let her lie and reste take.
 So she slept til afternoon
 75 That undertide was al ydoon.^o
 But as soone as she gan^o wake
 She cried and loathly bere^o gan make:
 She frotte^o her handes and her feet
 And cracched^o her visage—it bledde weet;^o
 80 Her riche robe she all torit,^o
 And was ravised^o out of her wit.
 The two maidenenes her beside
 Ne durste with her no long^o abide,
 But runne to the palace right
 85 And tolde bothe squire and knight
 That their queen awede^o would,
 And bad them go and her atholde.^o
 Knightes ran and ladies also,
 Damselles sixty and mo,^o
 90 In th'orchard to the queen they come,
 And her up in armes nome,^o
 And broughte her to bed at laste,
 And held her there fine^o faste.
 But evere she held^o in oo^o cry,
 95 And wolde up and away.
 When the king heard that tiding^o
 Never him nas^o worse for no thing:
 Orfeo came with knightes ten
 To chamber right before the queen,
 100 And looked and said with great pity,
 "O leve^o life, what aileth thee?—

That ever yet hast been so still,
And now thou gredest^o wonder shrill.
Thy body that was so white ycore^o
105 With thine nails is all totore.^o
Allas, thy rode^o that was so red
Is as wan as thou were dead.
And also thy fingers smale^o
Been all bloody and all pale.
110 Allas, thy lovesome yën^o two
Looketh so^o man doth on his foe.
A, dame, ich^o biseeche mercy—
Let be all this rueful cry,
And tell me what^o thee is and how,
115 And what thing may thee helpe now.”
Tho^o lay she stille at the laste,
And gan to weepe swithe^o faste,^o
And saide thus the king unto:
“Allas, my lord Sir Orfeo,
120 Sitthen^o we first together were
Ones wrothe never we nere,⁴
But ever ich have yloved thee
As my life, and so thou me.
But now we mote^o deelee^o atwo—
125 Do thy best, for I moot^o go.”
“Allas,” quath he, “forlorn ich am!
Whither wilt thou go and to wham?^o
Whither thou goost ich will with thee,
And whither I go thou shalt with me.”
130 “Nay, nay, sir, that not nis.^o
Ich will thee tell all how it is:
As ich lay this undertide^o
And slept under our orchard-side,
There come to me two faire knightes,
135 Well y-armed all to rightes,
And bade me comen on hying^o

And speke with their lord the king;
And ich answered at^o wordes bolde
That I ne durste not ne I nolde.^o
140 They prikked again as they might drive.^o
Tho^o came their king also blive^o
With an hundred knightes and mo,^o
And damiseles an hundred also,
Alle on snow-white steedes;
145 As white as milk were their weeddes:^o
I ne saw never yet before
So faire creatures ycore.^o
The king had a crown on his head:
It nas^o of silver n'of gold red,
150 But it was of a precious stone;
As brighte as the sun it shone.
And as soon as he to me cam,
Wolde ich, nolde ich,^o he me nam^o
And made me with him to ride
155 Upon a palfrey him beside,
And brougte me to his palais
Well attired^o in each a ways,^o
And showed me castels and towers,
Rivers, forests, frith^o with flowers,
160 And his riche steeds each one,
And sithen^o brought me again home
Into oure owene orche-yard,^o
And said to me thus afterward,
'Look tomorrow that thou be
165 Right here under this impe-tree,
And then thou shalt with us go,
And live with us everemo.^o
And if thou makest us ylet,^o
Where^o thou be, thou worst^o yfet.^o
170 And all totore^o thy limes^o all
That no thing thee helpe shall.
And though thou beest so totorn,

Yet thou worst^o with us yborn.' "^o
When king Orfeo heard this case,^o
175 "O, weel,"^o quath he, "allas, allas!
Lever^o me were to lete^o my life
Than thus to lose the queen my wife."
He asked conseil at^o each a man,
But no man him helpe can.
180 Amorrow the undertide is come,
And Orfeo hath his arms ynome,^o
And well ten hundred knights with him,
Each y-armed, stout and grim.
And with the queene wenten he^o
185 Right unto that impe-tree.
They made sheltrom^o in each a side,
And said they wolde there abide
And die there everichone,
Er^o the queen should from them goon.
190 And yet amiddes them full right
The queene was away ytwight,^o
With^o fairye forth ynome:^o
Men wiste never where she was bcome.⁵
Tho^o was there crying, weep and woe;
195 The king into his chamber is go
And ofte swooned upon the stone,^o
And made such dool^o and such moan
That nigh his life was yspent^o—
There was noon amendement.^o
200 He clept^o together his barouns,
Earles, lordes of renouns,^o
And when they all ycomen were,
"Lordings," he said, "before you here
Ich^o ordain myn high steward
205 To wite^o my kingdom afterward;
In my stede^o been he shall
To keep my londes overall.^o

For now I have my queen ylore,^o
 The fairest lady that ever was bore,^o
 210 Never eft^o I nil^o no woman see;
 In wilderness now will ich tee^o
 And live there for everemore,
 With wilde beasts in holtes hore.^o
 And when ye wite^o that I be spent,^o
 215 Make you then a parliament
 And choose you^o a newe king:
 Now dooth your best with all my thing."
 Tho^o was there weeping in the hall,
 And great cry among them alle;
 220 Unnethe^o mighte old or young
 For weeping speak a word with tongue.
 They kneeled all adown in fere^o
 And prayed him if his wille were,
 That he ne sholde from them go.
 225 "Do way,"^o quath he, "it shall be so."
 All his kingdom he forsook;
 But^o a sclavin^o on him he took:
 He had no kirtel^o ne noon hood,
 Shirt ne yet none other good.
 230 But his harp he took algate,^o
 And did him^o barefoot out at yate:^o
 No man moste^o with him go.
 O way,^o what^o there was weep and woe,
 When he that had been king with crown
 235 Went so poorelich out of town.
 Through the wood and over heath
 Into the wilderness he geeth.^o
 Nothing he fint^o that him is aise,^o
 But ever he liveth in great malaise.
 240 He that had wered^o the fowe and gris,⁶
 And on bed the purper bis,^o
 Now on harde heath he lith,^o

With leaves and grass he him writh.^o
He that had had castles and towers,
245 River, forest, frith^o with flowers,
Now though it ginne snow and freeze,
This king moot^o make his bed in meese.^o
He that had had knightes of pris,^o
Before him kneeling and ladies,
250 Now seeth he nothing that him liketh,^o
But wilde wormes^o by him striketh.^o
He that had yhad plenty
Of mete^o and drink, of each dainty,
Now may he alday^o dig and wrote^o
255 Er^o he find his fill of roote.^o
In summer he liveth by wilde fruit
And berien^o but goode lite,^o
In winter may he nothing finde
But roote, grasses, and the rinde.^o
260 All his body away was dwined^o
For misaise,^o and all toched.^o
Lord, who may tell of the sore
This king suffered ten year and more?
His hair of his beard, black and rowe,^o
265 To his girdle-stede^o was growe.
His harp whereon was all his glee
He hidde in an hollow tree,
And when the weather was clear and bright,
He took his harp to him well right,
270 And harped at his owene wille:^o
In all the wood the sound gan shille,^o
That wilde beestes that there beeth^o
For joy abouten him they teeth;^o
And all the foules that there were
275 Came and sat on each a brere^o
To here his harping afine,^o
So muche melody was therein.
When he his harping lete^o wolde,

No beast by him abide nolde.
280 Oft he might see him besides
In the hote undertides^o
The king of fairy with his route^o
Come to hunt him all aboute
With dinne, cry, and with blowing,
285 And houndes also with him barking.
But no beast they ne nome^o
Ne never he niste where they become.⁷
And otherwhile he mighte see,
As a great host by him tee,^o
290 Well atourned^o ten hundred knightes,
Each y-armed to his rightes,^o
Of countenance stout and fierce,
With manye displayed^o banners,
And each his sword ydrawe holde,
295 But never he niste^o where they wolde,
And somewhile he saw other thing:
Knightes and ladies come dancing,
In quainte^o atire, degisely,^o
Quainte pas^o and softly.
300 Tabours^o and trumpes yede^o him by,
And all mannere minstralcy.
And on a day he saw beside
Sixty ladies on horse ride,
Gentle and jolif^o as bird on ris^o—
305 Not one man amongst them nis.^o
And each a falcon on hand beer,^o
And riden on hawking by river.
Of game they founde well good haunt,^o
Mallards, heron, and cormorant.
310 The founs of^o the water ariseth;
The falcons them well deviseth:^o
Each falcon his prey slough.^o
That saw Orfeo and lough:^o

315 "Parfay!"^o quath he, "there is fair game!
 Thither ich will,^o by Goddes name.
 Ich was ywon^o such work to see."
 He arose and thither gan tee.^o
 To a lady he was ycome,
 Beheld, and hath well undernome,^o
 320 And seeth by all thing that it is
 His owne queen Dame Heurodis,
 Yerne^o beheld her and she him eke,^o
 But neither to other a word ne speak.
 For misaise^o that she on him seigh^o
 325 That hadde been so riche and heigh,
 The tears fell out of her eye.
 The othere ladies this ysye^o
 And maked her away to ride:
 She moste^o with him no longer abide.
 330 "Allas," quath he, "now me is woe.
 Why nil^o death now me not slo?^o
 Allas, wrecche,^o that I ne might
 Die now after this sight.
 Allas, too longe last^o my life
 335 When I ne dare not to my wife—
 Ne she to me—one word ne speak.
 Allas, why nil myn herte break?
 Parfay,"^o quath he, "tide what bitide,^o
 Whither so these ladies ride
 340 The selve^o waye ich will strecche:^o
 Of lif ne deeth me nothing recche."^o
 His sclavin^o he dide^o on also spak^o
 And hung his harp upon his back,
 And hadde well good will to goon:
 345 He ne spared neither stub ne stoon.⁸
 In at a rock^o the ladies rideth
 And he after and not abideth.
 When he was in the rock ago

Well three mile other mo,^o
350 He cam into a fair countrey,
As bright so^o sun on sommers day,
Smooth and plain^o and alle green:
Hill ne dale nas^o there none seen.
Amid the land a castle he seigh,^o
355 Riche and royal and wonder heigh.
All the utemoste^o wal
Was clear^o and shined as crystal.
An hundred towers there were aboute,
Degiseliche,^o and batailed⁹ stoute.
360 The buttress came out of the diche^o
Of red gold y-arched riche.¹
The voursour^o was anourned^o all
Of each manner diverse aumal.^o
Within there were wide wones,^o
365 And all were full of precious stones.
The worste pillar on to beholde
All it was of burnishéd golde.
All that land was ever light,
For when it should be therk^o and night
370 The riche stones lighte gonne^o
As bright as doth at noon the sonne.
No man may tell ne think in thought
The riche work that there was wrought.
By alle thing him thinkth it is
375 The proude court of Paradis.
In this castle the ladies alighte^o:
He would in^o after, if he mighte.
Orfeo knocketh at the gate:
The porter was ready therate^o
380 And asked what he would have ydo.^o
"Parfay,^o ich^o am a minstrel,^o lo,
To solace^o thy lord with my glee^o
If^o his sweete wille be."

385 The porter undid the gate anoon
 And let him into the castle goon.
 Then he gan look aboute^o al
 And saw lying within the wall,
 Of folk that there were thither ybrought,
 And thoughte^o dead, and nere not^o:
 390 Some stood withouten hade,^o
 And some none armes hade,
 And some through the body had wounde,
 And some lay wood^o ybounde;
 And some armed on horse sete,^o
 395 And some astrangled as they ete,^o
 And some were in water adreint,^o
 And some with fire all forshreint,^o
 Wives there lay on child-bedde,^o
 Some dede^o and some awedde.^o
 400 And wonder fele^o there lay besides
 Right as they slept their undertides^o
 Each was thus in this world ynome,^o
 With^o fairye thither ycome.
 There he saw his owne wife,
 405 Dame Heurodis, his leve^o life,
 Sleep under an impe-tree:
 By her clothes he knew it was she.
 When he had seen these marvels alle
 He went into the kinges halle.
 410 Then saw he there a seemly^o sight:
 A tabernacle^o well ydight^o—
 Their master king therinne sete,^o
 And their queene fair and sweete.
 Their crowns, their clothes shone so brighte
 415 That unnethe^o he behold them mighte.
 When he had seen all this thing,
 He kneeled adown before the king:
 "O lord," he said, "if thy will were,
 My minstralcy thou shouldest yheere."^o

420 The king answered, "What man art thou
That art hither ycomen now?
Ich, ne noon that is with me,
Ne sente never after thee.
Sith^o that ich here regne gan^o
425 I ne found never so hardy man
That hither to us durste wende^o
But^o that ich^o him would ofsende."^o
"Lord," quath he, "ye trowe^o well
I nam but a poor minstrel,^o
430 And, sir, it is the manner of us
To seeche^o many a lordes house.
And though we not welcome be,
Yet we mote^o proffer forth our glee."^o
Before the king he sat adown
435 And took his harp so merry of soun,^o
And tempreth^o it as he well can.
And blissful notes he there gan
That all that in the palace were
Come to him for to hear,
440 And lieth adown to his feet,
Them thinkth his melody so sweet.
The king herkneith^o and sit^o full still:
To hear his glee^o he hath good will.
Good bourde^o he hadde of his glee:
445 The riche queen also had she.
When he had stint^o of his harping,
Then said to him the riche king,
"Minstrel, me liketh well thy glee.
Now aske of me what it may be—
450 Largeliche^o ich will thee paye
Now speak and thou might it assaye."
"Sir," he said, "ich praye thee
That thou wouldest give me
The eche^o lady, bright on blee,^o
455 That sleepeth under the impe-tree."

"Nay," quath the king, "that not nere:°
 A sorry couple of you it were;
 For thou art lean, rowe,° and black,
 And she is lovesome, withoute lack.°
 460 A loathly thing it were forthy°
 To seen her in thy company."
 "O sire," he said, "gentle king,
 Yet were it a well fouler thing
 To hear a lesing° of thy mouthe.
 465 So, sire, as ye saide nouthe°
 What ich would aske, have I wolde,
 A kinges word moot° needs be holde."
 "Thou sayest sooth,"° the king said than,°
 "And sith° I am a trewe man,
 470 I will well that it be so:
 Take her by the hand and go.
 Of her ich will that thou be blithe."²
 He kneeled adown and thanked him swithe;°
 His wife he took by the hand
 475 And did him swithe out of that land,
 And wente° him out of that thede:°
 Right as he cam the way he yede.°
 So long he hath the way ynome°
 To Winchester he is ycome,
 480 That sometime was his owne city,
 But no man knew that it was he.
 No further than the townes ende
 For knoweleche³ he durste wende.°
 But in a beggeres bild° full narwe°
 485 There he hath take his herbarwe°
 (To° him and to his owne wife),
 As a minstrel of poore life,
 And asked tidinges° of that land,
 And who the kingdom held in hand.
 490 The poore begger in his cote°

Told him everich a grote^o—
 How their queen was stole awy,^o
 Ten year goon,^o with^o faïry.
 And how their king in exile yede^o
 495 But no man wiste^o in which thede;^o
 And how the steward the land gan holde,
 And other many things him tolde.
 Amorwe ayain the noon-tide⁴
 He maked his wife there abide,
 500 And beggers clothes he borwed anoon,^o
 And hung his harp his rigge^o upon,
 And went him into that city,
 That men might him behold and see.
 Bothe earls and barons bold,
 505 Burgeis^o and ladies him gan behold:
 "Lord," they saide, "such a man!
 How long the hair him hangeth upon!
 Lo, how his beard hangeth to his knee!
 He is yclungen^o also^o a tree!"
 510 And as he yede^o in the streete,
 With his steward he gan meete.
 And loud he set him on a cry,
 "Sir steward," he said, "grant mercy!
 Ich am an harpou of hethenesse:^o
 515 Help me now in this distresse."
 The steward said, "Come with me, come:
 Of that I have thou shalt have some.
 Each harper is welcome me to
 For my lordes love, Sir Orfeo."
 520 Anon they went into the halle,
 The steward and the lordes alle.
 The steward wash^o and went to mete,
 And many lordes by him sete.
 There were trumpours^o and tabourers,^o
 525 Harpers fele,^o and crouders:^o

Much melody they maked alle.
 And Orfeo sat still in halle.
 And herkneth; when they been all stille,
 He took his harp and tempered^o shille^o—
 530 The blisefullest notes he harped there
 That every man yherde with ear.
 Each man liked well his glee.^o
 The steward looked and gan ysee,
 And the harp knew also blive.^o
 535 "Minstrel," he said, "so mote^o thou thrive,
 Where haddest thou this harp and how?
 I pray that thou me telle now."
 "Lord," quath he, "in uncouthe^o thede,^o
 540 Through a forest as I yede,^o
 I found lying in a dale
 A man with^o lions totorn^o smale,
 And wolves him frette^o with teeth so sharp.
 By him I found this eche^o harp
 Well ten year it is ago."
 545 "O," quath the steward, "now me is woe!
 That was my lord Sir Orfeo.
 Allas, wrecche, what shall I do
 That have such a lord ylore?^o
 A, way,^o that ever ich was ybore^o
 550 That him^o was so hard grace^o y-yarked,^o
 And so vile death ymarked."^o
 Adown he fell aswoon to grounde.
 His barons him took up that stounde^o
 And telleth him how that it geeth:^o
 555 It is no boote^o of mannes death.
 King Orfeo knew well by than^o
 His steward was a trewe man
 And loved him as him ought to do,
 And stondeth up and saith thus, "Lo,
 560 Steward, herkne now this thing:
 If ich^o were Orfeo the king

And had ysuffered full yore^o
In wildernesses much sore,
And had ywonne my queen awy^o
565 Out of the land of fairy,
And had ybrought the lady hende^o
Right here to the townes ende,
And with a begger her in^o ynome,^o
And were myselve hither ycome
570 Poorelich to thee thus stille,^o
For to assay^o thy goode wille,
And^o ich founde thee thus trewe,
Thou ne sholdest it never rewe:^o
Sikerliche,^o for love or ay,^o
575 Thou sholdest be king after my day.
If thou of my death haddest been blithe,^o
Thou sholdest have voided^o also swithe."^o
 Tho^o alle tho^o that therinne sete
That it was Orfeo underyete,^o
580 And the steward well him knew:
Over and over the board he threw^o
And fell adown to his feete.
So did each lord that there sete,
And all they saide at oo^o crying,
585 "Ye beeth our lord, sir, and our king."
Glade they were of his live:
To chamber they ladde him as blive,^o
And bathed him and shaved his beard,
And tired^o him as a king apert.^o
590 And sith^o with greet procession
They brought the queen into the town,
With all manere minstrelsy.
Lord, there was great melody:
For joy they wepte with their eyë
595 That them so sound^o ycomen sye.^o
 Now Orfeo newe corowned^o is,
And his queen Dame Heurodis,

And lived longe afterward,
 And sitthen^o king was the steward.
 600 Harpers in Britain after than^o
 Heard how this marvel began
 And made a lay of good liking,^o
 And nempned^o it after the king.
 That lay is "Orfeo" yhote:^o
 605 Good is the lay, sweet is the note.
 Thus cam Sir Orfeo out of his care:
 God grant us alle well to fare.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text presented here is based on the Auchinleck manuscript (in the National Library of Scotland), with spelling modernized in order to maximize intelligibility without impairing rhyme or meter. The metrical form is the four-stress, iambic couplet, the standard English form used to translate French octosyllabic couplets.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, composed to be sung to the harp.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Fairyland and, more commonly, the otherworld and its supernatural inhabitants.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Never once were we angry (with one another).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: No one knew what had become of her.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: White and gray fur; that is, royal ermine.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Nor did he ever learn what happened to them.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, neither stump nor stone prevented him.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Furnished with battlements.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Made of red gold that arched splendidly: gold was commonly described as red in Middle English.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: With her, I wish that you be happy.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, for fear of being recognized.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the morning toward noontime.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *written*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cause* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to learn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *poems*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *composed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *events* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *occurred* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *once*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *jokes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Brittany*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *composed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *once occurred*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Bretons*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *anywhere* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gave*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *listen* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gentlemen*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *powerful*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *valiant* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *both*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *generous*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *[Queen] Juno*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *considered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Thrace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fortification*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *denial*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *music*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *applied* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *keenly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beginning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glorious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forenoon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *themselves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fairly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grafted fruit tree*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *passed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outcry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tore at*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scratched* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tore apart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ravished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *longer*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *go mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *restrain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *continued* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was (not)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cry out*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complexion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slender*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what the matter with*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *separate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not be possible*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forenoon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in haste*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as fast as they could*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straightway*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *clothes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splendid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whether I wished it or not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equipped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meadow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *orchard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evermore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *resistance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wherever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shall be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fetches*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torn apart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *limbs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shall be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *story*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preferable* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *they*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *military formation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *snatched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *floor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expressed such grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *finished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great names*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *keep*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *everywhere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *again* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gray woods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for yourselves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scarcely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stop*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *only* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pilgrim's cloak*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *short coat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at any rate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took himself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alas* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *how*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *finds* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purple linen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *covers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meadow*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *renown* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *snakes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glide* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *constantly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scrounge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *roots* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *berries* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *of little value* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bark* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wasted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hardship* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scarred* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rough* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *waist* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to resound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are there* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *draw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *briar* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to the end* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leave off* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mornings* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *passed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equipped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fittingly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unfurled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wonderfully* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *step*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drums* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pretty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bough*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plenty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *descry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laughed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *draw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understood*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wretched one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lasts*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *come what may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cloak* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *put* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cave*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *or more* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outmost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bright* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wonderfully* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vaulting* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *adorned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enamel* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *halls* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dark* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lit it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dismounted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *musical performer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delight* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *music* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *looked about* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seemed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drowned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shriveled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *birthing bed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *driven mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forenoons*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by force of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alcove* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrayed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with difficulty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to reign*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared to come*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *send for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *musical performer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seek*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *music*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tunes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listens* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sits*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *music*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entertainment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ceased*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *of hue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rough*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blemish*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *therefore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *now*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *country*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared to go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *house* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hovel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every detail*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ago* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *country*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straightaway*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burgesses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *withered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heathen country*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *washed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trumpeters* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drummers*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *many* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fiddlers* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *played* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loudly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *music* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *right away* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strange* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *country* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torn to bits* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordained* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appointed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *away* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gracious* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodging* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *regret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surely* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *dread*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been dismissed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understood*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he overturned the table*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dressed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *openly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *after*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healthy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afterward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well-pleasing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °

WILLIAM LANGLAND

ca. 1330–1388

William Langland is agreed by most scholars to be the sole author of a long religious allegory in alliterative verse known as *The Vision of Piers Plowman* or more simply *Piers Plowman*, which survives in at least three distinct versions that scholars refer to as the A-, B-, and C-texts. The first, about twenty-four hundred lines long, breaks off at a rather inconclusive point in the action; the second (from which all but one of the selections here have been drawn) is a revision of the first plus an extension of more than four thousand lines; and the third is a revision of the second. About Langland we know hardly anything except what can be inferred from the poem itself. He came from the west of England and was probably a native of the Malvern Hills area, in which the opening of the poem is set. We can never identify the persona of the narrator of a medieval text positively or precisely with its author, especially when we are dealing with allegory. Nevertheless, a passage that was added to the C-text, the last of the selections printed here, gives the strong impression of being at one and the same time an allegory in which the narrator represents willful Mankind and a poignantly ironic self-portrait of the stubborn poet who occasionally plays on his own name: "I have lived in *land* . . . my name is *Long Will*" (15.152). In this new episode the narrator tries to defend his shiftless way of life against Conscience and Reason, presumably his own conscience and reason. The entire work conforms well with the notion that its author was a man who

was educated to enter the Church but who, through marriage and lack of preferment, was reduced to poverty and may well have wandered in his youth like those “hermits” he scornfully describes in the Prologue.

Piers Plowman has the form of a dream vision, a common medieval genre in which the author presents the story under the guise of having dreamed it. The dream vision generally involves allegory, not only because one expects from a dream the unrealistic, the fanciful, but also because people have always suspected that dreams relate the truth in disguised form—that they are natural allegories. Through a series of such visions the poem traces the Dreamer-narrator’s tough-minded, persistent, and passionate search for answers to his many questions, especially the question he puts early in the poem to Lady Holy Church: “How I may save my soul.” Langland’s theme is nothing less than the history of Christianity as it unfolds both in the world of the Old and New Testaments and in the life and heart of an individual fourteenth-century Christian—two seemingly distinct realms between which the poet’s allegory moves with dizzying rapidity.

Within the larger sequence of the poem, from its beginning until the end of Passus 7, the following selections form a thematically coherent narrative. In the Prologue (the first selection), Langland’s narrator falls asleep and witnesses a compact vision of the whole of late fourteenth-century English society. Poised between two stark and static possibilities of heaven and hell, an intensely active, mobile earthly life is concentrated into a “field full of folk.” Some ideal practitioners of earthly occupations are surrounded and undermined by a much larger set of very energetic social types who exploit their occupations for entirely selfish ends. Langland here participates in the genre of estates satire, which surveys and excoriates each worldly occupation (see Chaucer’s very different example of estates satire in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*). Langland reserves his especial anger for those who abuse church authority and for those who are wealthy but pitiless.



Between Heaven and Hell. Hieronymus Bosch, *Haywain Triptych*, ca. 1490–95. The calm scene atop the haystack is perilously perched between heaven and hell, and above the furious activity of the world.

Passus, Latin for “step,” is the word used for the poem’s basic divisions. Passus 1 (the second selection) promises to give some intellectual and moral purchase on the teeming energies of the Prologue. Holy Church instructs the poem’s narrator and dreamer Will in the proper relation of material wealth and spiritual health. In particular, she accentuates the value of the “best treasure,” *truthe*, one of Langland’s key words: *truthe* is the justice that flows from God; it manifests itself in the exercise of earthly justice and fidelity, and in the correlative poetic value of truth telling. Will recognizes the force of Holy Church’s sermon, but still needs to know it by an interior form of knowledge, grounded in the depths of the self.

It would seem that the rest of the poem is devoted to the discovery of that internalized truth. The first of the poem’s large-scale narratives (Passus 2–4) represents the attempt of earthly justice to control the disruptive energies of the profit economy. That

economy is here represented by the personification “Lady Mede,” who signifies “reward beyond deserving.” After this sequence concerning earthly justice, the poem then turns to the deeper, more personal mechanisms of spiritual justice. In Passus 5, accordingly, the seven Deadly Sins confess in turn, before the poem’s ideal earthly representative of justice, Piers Plowman, offers to lead a spiritual pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Truth (Passus 5.506–642, the third selection).

The ideal of *truthe* takes a local habitation, then, in the model of society that Piers establishes for the conduct of his “pilgrimage.” The truest form of pilgrimage is no pilgrimage at all; instead, all classes of society should stay at home and work harmoniously for the production of material food by agricultural workers, with knights helping plowmen and protecting the Church, while priests pray for both workers and knights. This ideal scene is pictured in Passus 6 (the fourth selection).

Langland’s poem might seem, thus far, to be a deeply conservative one, whereby justice is manifest only in a manorial society, within which each person knows his or her place, and works harmoniously and obediently with the others. There is a problem with this model, however: it collapses. In Passus 6 the ideal society put into action by Piers fails entirely; workers simply refuse to work, abuse the authority of knights, and respond only to the terrible pressure of Hunger, a punishing, Gargantuan figure who graphically evokes the ravages of famine in the fourteenth century.

The shortcomings of Truth propel Will to a more urgent search for God's love and forgiveness, beyond justice, in the deepest resources of his own self.

This search climaxes in the vision of Christ's Atonement. Passus 18 (the sixth selection) describes the central event of Christianity, the Crucifixion, followed by an account of Christ's descent into hell, traditionally called the "Harrowing of Hell." Piers, who had assumed aspects of Adam, Moses, and the Good Samaritan (while never ceasing to be the ideal plowman), is now partially identified with Christ. The terms of this identification are rooted in the material necessity of food: Christ has come to fetch the "fruit" of Piers Plowman. The "food" that Christ seeks has now become the souls of the patriarchs and prophets, and of all humanity, which must be redeemed from the devil's power. And just as the earthly Piers becomes Christlike, so too does Christ, in his bodily manifestation, become intensely human. He jousts in the arms (that is, no arms at all, but the unprotected flesh) of Piers Plowman; he comes to earth precisely in order to *know* what being human is like; and he does so precisely because of his co-natural, sympathetic kinship with suffering humanity.

For all that, Langland does not focus here for long on the grievous suffering of Christ. On the contrary, he addresses the terms of the Atonement through intellectual debate, first through the Four Daughters of God (personifications taken from Psalm 85:10 [Vulgate 84:11]), and then through Christ's direct encounter with Lucifer. Against powerful legal and written evidence to the contrary, first Mercy and Peace and then Christ himself reveal a divine sympathy with imprisoned humanity. This mercy is more powerful than the law of strict Truth or justice, by which humanity appears to have been irredeemably damned. So far from being a wounded, suffering figure, Langland's Christ is at once spiritually triumphant and a delighted trickster, by whose divine guile the devil has been fooled. But we should also notice that this story of redemption depends on anti-Judaic polemic. When Faith calls for vengeance against the "false Jews," the personification speaks in the same terms as those used to justify medieval violence against Jewish communities. For

more on Christian anti-Judaism, see “Religious Exclusions and Identities” ([pp. 285–362](#)).

In the last selection presented here, from the C-text, Langland presents a more moving, if less passionate and conflicted, scene than the tearing up of Truth’s pardon. In a passage often regarded as autobiographical, Will argues with Conscience and Reason (principles of law, but surely also Will’s own conscience and reason). They reproach him for his way of life in a poor district of London, where Will barely supports his family with alms he gets by praying for the souls of wealthy burghers.

A large number of manuscripts and two sixteenth-century editions show that *Piers Plowman* was avidly read and studied by a great many people from the end of the fourteenth century to the reign of Elizabeth I. Almost from the first, it was a controversial text. Within four years of the writing of the second version—which scholars have good evidence to date 1377, the year of Edward III’s death and Richard II’s accession to the throne—it had become so well known that the leaders of the Uprising of 1381 used phrases borrowed from it as part of the rhetoric of the rebellion. Langland’s sympathy with the sufferings of the poor and his indignant satire of corruption in church and state undoubtedly made his poem popular with the rebels. Many persons reading his poem in the sixteenth century (it was first printed in 1550) saw in *Piers Plowman* a prophecy and forerunner of the English Reformation. Immersed as it is in thorny political and theological controversies of its own day, *Piers Plowman* is arguably the most difficult and, at times, even the most frustrating of Middle English texts, but its poetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and integrity also make it one of the most rewarding.

From The Vision of Piers Plowman^{[1](#)}

Endnotes

- Note 1: The translation is by E. T. Donaldson (1990) and is based on *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, edited by George Kane and E. T. Donaldson (1975).[Return to reference 1](#)

From *The Prologue*

[THE FIELD OF FOLK]

In a summer season when the sun was mild
I clad myself in clothes as I'd become a sheep;
In the habit of a hermit unholy of works,²
Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders.
And on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,
5 There befell me as by magic a marvelous thing:
I was weary of wandering and went to rest
At the bottom of a broad bank by a brook's side,
And as I lay lazily looking in the water
I slipped into a slumber, it sounded so pleasant.
10 There came to me reclining there a most curious
dream
That I was in a wilderness, nowhere that I knew;
But as I looked into the east, up high toward the
sun,
I saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly built,
A deep dale beneath, a dungeon tower in it,
15 With ditches deep and dark and dreadful to look at.
A fair field full of folk I found between them,
Of human beings of all sorts, the high and the low,
Working and wandering as the world requires.
Some applied themselves to plowing, played very
20 rarely,
Sowing seeds and setting plants worked very hard;
Won what wasters gluttonously consume.
And some pursued pride, put on proud clothing,
Came all got up in garments garish to see.
To prayers and penance many put themselves,
25 All for love of our Lord lived hard lives,

Hoping thereafter to have Heaven's bliss—
Such as hermits and anchorites that hold to their
cells,
Don't care to go cavorting about the countryside,
With some lush livelihood delighting their bodies.
30 And some made themselves merchants—they
managed better,
As it seems to our sight that such men prosper.
And some make mirth as minstrels can
And get gold for their music, guiltless, I think.
35 But jokers and word jugglers, Judas' children,³
Invent fantasies to tell about and make fools of
themselves,
And have whatever wits they need to work if they
wanted.
What Paul preaches of them I don't dare repeat
here:
*Qui loquitur turpiloquium*⁴ is Lucifer's henchman.
40 Beadsmen⁵ and beggars bustled about
Till both their bellies and their bags were crammed
to the brim;
Staged flytings⁶ for their food, fought over beer.
In gluttony, God knows, they go to bed
And rise up with ribaldry, those Robert's boys.^o
Sleep and sloth pursue them always.
45 Pilgrims and palmers⁷ made pacts with each other
To seek Saint James⁸ and saints at Rome.
They went on their way with many wise stories,
And had leave to lie all their lives after.
I saw some that said they'd sought after saints:
50 In every tale they told their tongues were tuned to
lie
More than to tell the truth—such talk was theirs.
A heap of hermits with hooked staffs

Went off to Walsingham,⁹ with their wenches behind
them.
Great long lubbers that don't like to work
55 Dressed up in cleric's dress to look different from
other men
And behaved as they were hermits, to have an easy
life.
I found friars there—all four of the orders¹—
Preaching to the people for their own paunches'
welfare,
60 Making glosses^o of the Gospel that would look good
for themselves;
Coveting copes,² they construed it as they pleased.
Many of these Masters³ may clothe themselves
richly,
For their money and their merchandise⁴ march hand
in hand.
Since Charity⁵ has proved a peddler and principally
shrives lords,
65 Many marvels have been manifest within a few
years.
Unless Holy Church and friars' orders hold together
better,
The worst misfortune in the world will be welling up
soon.
A pardoner⁶ preached there as if he had priest's
rights,
Brought out a bull⁷ with bishop's seals,
70 And said he himself could absolve them all
Of failure to fast, of vows they'd broken.
Unlearned men believed him and liked his words,
Came crowding up on knees to kiss his bulls.
He banged them with his brevet and bleared their
eyes,⁸

75 And raked in with his parchment-roll rings and
brooches.
Thus you give your gold for gluttons' well-being,
And squander it on scoundrels schooled in lechery.
If the bishop were blessed and worth both his ears,
His seal should not be sent out to deceive the
people.
80 —It's nothing to the bishop that the blackguard
preaches,
And the parish priest and the pardoner split the
money
That the poor people of the parish would have but
for them.
Parsons and parish priests complained to the
bishop
That their parishes were poor since the pestilence-
time,⁹
85 Asked for license and leave to live in London,
And sing Masses there for simony,¹ for silver is
sweet.

* * *

Yet scores of men stood there in silken coifs
Who seemed to be law-sergeants² that served at the
bar,
Pleaded cases for pennies and impounded³ the law,
And not for love of our Lord once unloosed their lips:
215 You might better measure mist on Malvern Hills
Than get a "mum" from their mouths till money's on
the table.
Barons and burgesses⁴ and bondmen also
I saw in this assemblage, as you shall hear later;
Bakers and brewers and butchers aplenty.
Weavers of wool and weavers of linen,
220 Tailors, tinkers, tax-collectors in markets,

Masons, miners, many other craftsmen.
 Of all living laborers there leapt forth some,
 Such as diggers of ditches that do their jobs badly,
 And dawdle away the long day with "*Dieu save dame*
 225 *Emme.*"⁵
 Cooks and their kitchen-boys crying, "Hot pies, hot!
 Good geese and pork! Let's go and dine!"
 Tavern-keepers told them a tale of the same sort:
 "White wine of Alsace and wine of Gascony,
 230 Of the Rhine and of La Rochelle, to wash the roast
 down with."
 All this I saw sleeping, and seven times more.

Endnotes

- Note 2: For Langland's opinion of hermits, see lines 28–30 and 53–57. The sheep's clothing may suggest the habit's physical resemblance to sheep's wool as well as a false appearance of innocence.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Minstrels who deceive with jokes and fantastic stories are regarded as descendants of Christ's betrayer, Judas.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Who speaks filthy language (Latin). See Ephesians 5:3–4 and 11–12.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Prayer sayers, that is, people who offered to say prayers, sometimes counted on the beads of the rosary, for the souls of those who gave them alms.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Contests in which the participants took turns insulting each other, preferably in verse.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Virtually professional pilgrims who took advantage of the hospitality offered them to go on traveling year after year (see p. 474, n. 4).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, his shrine at Compostela in Spain.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: English town, site of a famous shrine to the Virgin Mary.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In Langland's day there were four orders of friars in England: Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Monks', friars', and hermits' capes.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, masters of divinity.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The "merchandise" sold by the friars for money is shrift, that is, confession and remission of sins, which by canon law cannot be sold.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The ideal of the friars, as stated by St. Francis, was simply love, that is, charity.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An official empowered to pass on from the pope temporal indulgence for the sins of people who contributed to charitable enterprises—a function frequently abused.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Papal license to act as a pardoner, endorsed with the local bishop's seals.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, pulled the wool over their eyes. "Brevet": pardoner's license.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Since 1349 England had suffered a number of epidemics of the plague, the Black Death, which had caused famine and depopulated the countryside.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Buying and selling the functions, spiritual powers, or offices of the church. Wealthy persons, especially in London, set up foundations to pay priests to sing masses for their souls and those of their relatives (see the portrait of Chaucer's Parson, pp. 485–86, lines 477–528).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Important lawyers (see *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 481, lines 311ff.). "Coifs": silk scarves were lawyers' badges of office.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Detained in legal custody. Pennies were fairly valuable coins in medieval England.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Town dwellers who had full rights as the citizens of a municipality. In contrast, barons were members of the upper nobility, and bondmen were peasants who held their land from a

lord in return for customary services or rent.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: “God save Dame Emma” (French), presumably a popular song.[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *robbers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *interpretations* [Return to reference °](#)

From *Passus 1*

[THE TREASURE OF TRUTH]

What this mountain means, and the murky dale,
And the field full of folk I shall clearly tell you.
A lady lovely of look, in linen clothes,
Came down from the castle and called me gently,
And said, "Son, are you asleep? Do you see these
5 people,
How busy they're being about the maze?
The greatest part of the people that pass over this
earth,
If they have well-being in this world, they want
nothing more:
For any heaven other than here they have no
thought."
I was afraid of her face, fair though she was,
10 And said, "Mercy, madam, what may this mean?"
"The tower on the hill-top," she said, "Truth⁶ is
within it,
And would have you behave as his words teach.
For he is father of faith, formed you all
Both with skin and with skull, and assigned you five
15 senses
To worship him with while you are here.
And therefore he ordered the earth to help each one
of you
With woolens, with linens, with livelihood at need,
In a moderate manner to make you at ease;
And of his kindness declared three things common to
20 all:
None are necessary but these, and now I will name
them

And rank them in their right order—you repeat them
after.

25 The first is vesture to defend you from the cold;
The second is food at fit times to fend off hunger,
And drink when you're dry—but don't drink beyond
reason

Or you will be the worse for it when you've work to
do.

For Lot in his lifetime because he liked drink
Did with his daughters what the Devil found
pleasing,
Took delight in drink as the Devil wished,
30 And lechery laid hold on him and he lay with them
both,
Blamed it all on the wine's working, that wicked
deed.

*Let us make him drunk with wine, and let us lie
with him, that we may preserve seed of
our father.*⁷

By wine and by women there Lot was overcome
And there begot in gluttony graceless brats.
Therefore dread delicious drink and you'll do the
better:
35 Moderation is medicine no matter how you yearn.
It's not all good for your ghost⁸ that your gut wants
Nor of benefit to your body that's a blessing to your
soul.

Don't believe your body for it does the bidding of a
liar:
That is this wretched world that wants to betray you;
40 For the Fiend and your flesh both conform to it,
And that besmirches your soul: set this in your heart,
And so that you should yourself be wary I'm giving
this advice."

“Ah, madam, mercy,” said I, “your words much
please me.
But the money minted on earth that men are so
greedy for,
Tell me to whom that treasure belongs?”
45 “Go to the Gospel,” she said, “that God himself spoke
When the people approached him with a penny in
the temple
And asked whether they should worship⁹ with it
Caesar the king.
And he asked them to whom the inscription referred
‘And the image also that is on the coin?’
50 ‘*Caesaris*,’¹ they said, ‘we can all see it clearly.’
‘*Reddite Caesari*,’ said God, ‘what *Caesari* belongs,²
And *quae sunt Dei Deo*, or else you do wrong.’
For rightfully Reason³ should rule you all,
And Kind Wit be keeper to take care of your wealth
55 And be guardian of your gold to give it out when you
need it,
For economy⁴ and he are of one accord.”
Then I questioned her courteously, in the Creator’s
name,
“The dungeon in the dale that’s dreadful to see,
What may it mean, madam, I beseech you?”
60 “That is the Castle of Care: whoever comes into it
Will be sorry he was ever born with body and soul.
The captain of the castle is called Wrong,
Father of falsehood, he founded it himself.
Adam and Eve he egged to evil,
65 Counseled Cain to kill his brother;
He made a joke out of Judas with Jewish silver,⁵
And afterwards on an elder tree hanged him high.
He’s a molester of love, lies to every one;
Those who trust in his treasure are betrayed
70 soonest.”

Then I wondered in my wits what woman it might
be
Who could show from Holy Scripture such wise
words,
And I conjured her in the high name, ere she went
away,
To say who she really was that taught me so well.
75 "I am Holy Church," she said, "you ought to know
me:
I befriended you first and taught the faith to you.
You gave me gages⁶ to be guided by my teaching
And to love me loyally while your life lasts."
Then kneeling on my knees I renewed my plea for
grace,
80 Prayed piteously to her to pray for my sins,
And advise me how I might find natural faith⁷ in
Christ,
That I might obey the command of him who made
me man.
"Teach me of no treasure, but tell me this one thing,
How I may save my soul, sacred as you are?"
85 "When all treasures are tried, Truth is the best.
I call on *Deus caritas*⁸ to declare the truth.
It's as glorious a love-gift as dear God himself.
For whoever is true of his tongue, tells nothing
untrue,
Does his work with truth, wishes no man ill,
90 He is a god by the Gospel, on ground and aloft.
And also like our Lord by Saint Luke's words.⁹
Clerks who've been taught this text should tell it all
about,
For Christians and non-Christians lay claim to it both.
To keep truth kings and knights are required by
reason,

95 And to ride out in realms about and beat down
wrong-doers,
Take *transgressores*¹ and tie them up tight
Until Truth has determined their trespass in full.
For David in his days when he dubbed knights²
Made them swear on their swords to serve Truth
forever.

100 That is plainly the profession that's appropriate for
knights,
And not to fast one Friday in five score winters,
But to hold with him and with her who ask for truth,
And never leave them for love nor through a liking
for presents,
And whoever passes that point is an apostate to his
order.

105 For Christ, King of Kings, created ten orders,³
Cherubim and seraphim, seven such and another.
Gave them might in his majesty—the merrier they
thought it—
And over his household he made them archangels,
Taught them through the Trinity how Truth may be
known,

110 And to be obedient to his bidding—he bade nothing
else.
Lucifer with his legions learned this in Heaven,
And he was the loveliest of light after our Lord
Till he broke obedience—his bliss was lost to him
And he fell from that fellowship in a fiend's likeness
Into a deep dark hell, to dwell there forever,

115 And more thousands went out with him than any
one could count,
Leaping out with Lucifer in loathly shapes,
Because they believed Lucifer who lied in this way:
*I shall set my foot in the north and I shall be like the
most high.*⁴

120 And all that hoped it might be so, no Heaven could
hold them,
But they fell out in fiend's likeness fully nine days
together,
Till God of his goodness granted that Heaven settle,
Become stationary and stable, and stand in quiet.
When these wicked ones went out they fell in
wondrous wise,
125 Some in air, some on earth, some deep in hell,
But Lucifer lies lowest of them all.
For pride that puffed him up his pain has no end.
And all that work with wrong will surely make their
way
After their death-day to dwell with that wretch.
But those who wish to work well, as holy words
130 direct,
And who end, as I said earlier, in Truth that is the
best
May be certain that their souls will ascend to Heaven
Where Truth is in Trinity, bestowing thrones on all
who come.
Therefore I say as I said before, by the sense of
these texts
When all treasures are tried, Truth is the best.
135 Let unlearned men be taught this, for learned men
know it,
That Truth is the trustiest treasure on earth."
"Yet I've no natural knowledge,"⁵ said I, "you must
teach me more clearly
Through what force faith is formed in my body and
where."
"You doting dolt," said she, "dull are your wits:
140 Too little Latin you learned, lad, in your youth.
*Alas, I repine for a barren youth was mine.*⁶
It's a natural knowledge that's nurtured in your heart

To love your Lord more dearly than you love yourself,
To do no deadly sin though you should die for it.
This I trust is truth: whoever can teach you better,
145 Look to it that you let him speak, and learn it after.
For thus his word witnesses: do your work
accordingly.
For Truth tells us that love is the trustiest medicine in
Heaven.
No sin may be seen on him by whom that spice is
used.
And all the deeds he pleased to do were done with
150 love.
And he⁷ taught it to Moses as a matchless thing, and
most like Heaven,
And also the plant of peace, most precious of
virtues.
For Heaven might not hold it,⁸ so heavy it seemed,
Till it had with earth alloyed itself.
And when it had of this earth taken flesh and blood,
155 Never was leaf upon linden lighter thereafter,
And portable and piercing as the point of a needle:
No armor might obstruct it, nor any high walls.
Therefore Love is leader of the Lord's people in
Heaven,
And an intermediary as the mayor is between
160 community and king.
Just so Love is a leader by whom the law's enforced
Upon man for his misdeeds—he measures the fine.
And to know this naturally, it's nourished by a power
That has its head in the heart, and its high source.
For a natural knowledge in the heart is nourished by
165 a power
That's let fall by the Father who formed us all,
Looked on us with love and let his son die
Meekly for our misdeeds, to amend us all.

Yet he⁹ did not ask harm on those who hurt him so
badly,
But with his mouth meekly made a prayer for mercy
—
170 For pity for those people who so painfully killed him.
Here you may see examples in himself alone,
How he was mighty and meek, and bade mercy be
granted
To those who hanged him high and pierced his
heart.

* * *

205 Love is Life's doctor, and next¹ our Lord himself,
And also the strait² street that goes straight to
Heaven.
Therefore I say as I said before, by the sense of
these texts,
When all treasures are tried, Truth is the best.
Now that I've told you what Truth is—there's no
treasure better—
I may delay no longer now: our Lord look after you."

Endnotes

- Note 6: Langland plays on three meanings of the term "Truth": (1) fidelity, integrity—as in modern "troth"; (2) reality, actuality, conformity with what is; (3) God, the ultimate truth.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Genesis 19:32.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Spirit.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: "Worship" in Middle English often means religious celebration, but the worship of God is only one instance of showing the appropriate honor and respect to someone or something; the word can therefore be used about objects other than God.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Caesar's (Latin).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "Render unto Caesar" (Latin); "to Caesar." In the next line the Latin clause means "What are God's unto God." See Matthew 22:15–21.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Langland distinguishes the role of reason, as the distinctive human capacity to reach truth by discursive reasoning, from the functions of a number of other related mental processes and sources of truth, for example, Kind Wit (next line): natural intelligence, common sense.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, prudent management.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: For the fall of Adam and Eve, see Genesis 3; for Cain's murder of Abel, see Genesis 4. In the next lines, for Judas's betrayal of Jesus, see Matthew 26:14–16; for his death (line 68), see Matthew 27:3–6.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, pledges (at baptism).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Middle English phrase is "kynde knowynge."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "God [is] love" (Latin): 1 John 4:8.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Not in Luke; but see 1 John 4:16 and see Psalm 81:6. The phrase "a god by the Gospel" is Langland's; what he means by it will be a recurrent theme.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Transgressors: the Latin word appears in Isaiah 53:12 (Vulgate).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Behind the idea that King David created knighthood probably lies his selection of officers for his army (1 Chronicles 12:18) translated into chivalric terms; like other heroes, he was typically portrayed in the Middle Ages as a chivalric figure, just as God's creation of the angels, below, is pictured in terms of a medieval aristocratic household.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, ten orders of heavenly beings: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, angels, and the nameless order that fell with Lucifer.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Isaiah 14:13–14, which in the Vulgate has "throne" (*solium*) where Langland has "foot" (*pedem*).[Return to](#)

[reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Instinctive or experiential knowledge; Langland's phrase, a recurrent and important one, is "kynde knowynge."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Proverbial.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, Truth.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, love, which, as the passage goes on, becomes embodied in Christ.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, Christ, not the Father as in the sentence before. In such slippery transitions from one subject to another, Langland takes advantage of the greater flexibility of Middle English syntax; and usually, as here, the transition reflects an important connection of ideas, in this case the relationship between God's action and Christ's.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Next to.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, narrow; see Matthew 7:13–14.[Return to reference 2](#)

From *Passus 5*

[PIERS PLOWMAN SHOWS THE WAY TO SAINT TRUTH]

Then Hope took hold of a horn of *Deus tu conversus
vivificabis nos*³
And blew it with *Beati quorum remissae sunt
iniquitates*,⁴
So that all the saints sang for sinners at once,
"Men and animals thou shalt save inasmuch as thou
hast multiplied thy mercy, O God."⁵
A thousand men then thronged together,
510 Cried upward to Christ and to his clean mother
To have grace to go to Truth—God grant they might!
But there was no one so wise as to know the way
thither,
But they blundered forth like beasts over banks and
hills
Till they met a man, many hours later,
515 Appareled like a pagan⁶ in pilgrims' manner.
He bore a stout staff with a broad strap around it,
In the way of woodbine wound all about.
A bowl and a bag he bore by his side.
A hundred holy water phials were set on his hat,
520 Souvenirs of Sinai and shells of Galicia,
And many a Cross on his cloak and keys of Rome,
And the vernicle in front so folk should know
By seeing his signs what shrines he'd been to.⁷
These folk asked him fairly from whence he came.
525 "From Sinai," he said, "and from the Holy Sepulchre.
Bethlehem, Babylon, I've been to both;
In Armenia, in Alexandria,⁸ in many other places.

You can tell by the tokens attached to my hat
That I've walked far and wide in wet and in dry
530 And sought out good saints for my soul's health."
"Did you ever see a saint," said they, "that men call
Truth?
Could you point out a path to where that person
lives?"
"No, so God save me," said the fellow then.
"I've never known a palmer^o with knapsack or staff
535 To ask after him ere now in this place."
"Peter!"⁹ said a plowman, and put forth his head.
"We're as closely acquainted as a clerk and his
books.
Conscience and Kind Wit¹ coached me to his place
And persuaded me to swear to him I'd serve him
540 forever,
Both to sow and set plants so long as I can work.
I have been his follower all these forty winters,
Both sowed his seed and overseen his cattle,
Indoors and outdoors taken heed for his profit,
Made ditches and dikes, done what he bids.
545 Sometimes I sow and sometimes I thresh,
In tailor's craft and tinker's, whatever Truth can
devise.
I weave wool and wind it and do what Truth says.
For though I say it myself, I serve him to his
satisfaction.
I get good pay from him, and now and again more.
550 He's the promptest payer that poor men know.
He withholds no worker's wages so he's without
them by evening.
He's as lowly as a lamb and lovely of speech.
And if you'd like to learn where that lord dwells,
I'll direct you on the road right to his palace."
555

"Yes, friend Piers,"² said these pilgrims, and
proffered him pay.

"No, by the peril of my soul!" said Piers, and swore
on oath:

"I wouldn't take a farthing's fee for Saint Thomas's
shrine."³

Truth would love me the less a long time after.

560 But you that are anxious to be off, here's how you
go:

You must go through Meekness, both men and
women,

Till you come into Consciences⁴ that Christ knows
the truth

That you love our Lord God of all loves the most,
And next to him your neighbors—in no way harm
them,

565 Otherwise than you'd have them behave to you.
And so follow along a brook's bank, Be-Modest-Of-
Speech,

Until you find a ford, Do-Your-Fathers-Honor;
*Honor thy father and thy mother, etc.*⁵

Wade in that water and wash yourselves well there
And you'll leap the lighter all your lifetime.

570 So you shall see Swear-Not-Unless-It-Is-For-Need-
And-Namely-Never-Take-In-Vain-The-Name-Of-God-
Amighty.

Then you'll come to a croft,⁶ but don't come into it:
The croft is called Covet-Not-Men's-Cattle-Nor-Their-
Wives-

And-None-Of-Your-Neighbor's-Serving-Men-So-As-To-
Harm-Them.

575 See that you break no boughs there unless they
belong to you.

Two wooden statues stand there, but don't stop for
them:

They're called Steal-Not and Slay-Not: stay away
from both;
Leave them on your left hand and don't look back.
And hold well your holiday until the high evening.⁷
Then you shall blench at a barrow,⁸ Bear-No-False-
580 Witness:
It's fenced in with florins and other fees aplenty.
See that you pluck no plant there for peril of your
soul.
Then you shall see Speak-The-Truth-So-It-Must-Be-
Done-
And-Not-In-Any-Other-Way-Not-For-Any-Man's-
Asking.
Then you shall come to a castle shining clear as the
585 sun.
The moat is made of mercy, all about the manor;
And all the walls are of wit^o to hold will out.
The crenelations^o are of Christendom to save
Christiankind,
Buttressed with Believe-So-Or-You-Won't-Be-Saved;
And all the houses are roofed, halls and chambers,
590 Not with lead but with Love-And-Lowness-As-
Brothers-Of-
One-Womb.
The bridge is of Pray-Properly-You-Will-Prosper-The-
More.
Every pillar is of penance, of prayers to saints;
The hooks are of almsdeeds that the gates are
hanging on.
The gate-keeper's name is Grace, a good man
595 indeed;
His man is called Amend-Yourself, for he knows
many men.
Say this sentence to him: 'Truth sees what's true;
I performed the penance the priest gave me to do

And I'm sorry for my sins and shall be so always
When I think thereon, though I were a pope.'
600 Pray Amend-Yourself mildly to ask his master once
To open wide the wicket-gate that the woman shut
When Adam and Eve ate unroasted apples.

*Through Eve it was closed to all and through
the Virgin*

*Mary it was opened again.*⁹

605 For he keeps the latchkey though the king sleep.
And if Grace grants you to go in in this way
You shall see in yourself Truth sitting in your heart
In a chain of charity as though you were a child
again,¹
To suffer your sire's will and say nothing against it."

* * *

630 "By Christ," cried a pickpocket, "I have no kin there."
"Nor I," said an ape-trainer, "for anything I know."
"God knows," said a cake-seller, "if I were sure of
this,
I wouldn't go a foot further for any friar's preaching."
"Yes!" said Piers Plowman, and prodded him for his
good.

635 "Mercy is a maiden there that has dominion over
them all,
And she is sib to all sinners, and her son as well,
And through the help of these two—think nothing
else—

You might get grace there if you go in time."
"By Saint Paul!" said a pardoner, "possibly I'm not
known there;
640 I'll go fetch my box with my brevets and a bull with
bishop's letters."

"By Christ!" said a common woman,² "I'll keep you
company.

You shall say I am your sister." I don't know what became of them.

Endnotes

- Note 3: O God, you will turn and give us life (from the Latin Mass).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Blessed [are they] whose transgressions are forgiven (Latin; Psalm 31.1 [Vulgate]).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Psalm 36:6–7 (Vulgate 35:7–8).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, outlandishly. (Langland's word *paynym* was especially associated with Saracens, that is, Arabs.)[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A pilgrim to Canterbury collected a phial of holy water from St. Thomas's shrine; collecting another every time one passed through Canterbury was a mark of a professional pilgrim. "Sinai": souvenirs from the Convent of St. Katharine on Sinai. "Shells": the emblem of St. James at Compostela, in Galicia. "Many a cross": commemorating trips to the Holy Land. "Keys": the sign of St. Peter's keys, from Rome. "Vernicle": a copy of the image of Christ's face preserved on a cloth, another famous relic from Rome. It was believed to have appeared after Veronica gave her head cloth to Christ, as he was going to execution, to wipe his face on.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Babylon": near Cairo, where there was a church on the site where Mary lived during the Flight into Egypt. "Armenia": presumably to visit Mount Ararat, where the Ark is said to have landed. "Alexandria": the site of the martyrdom of St. Catherine and St. Mark.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, an oath "By St. Peter!"[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Moral sense and natural intelligence (common sense).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, Peter, hence the particular appropriateness of his swearing by St. Peter (line 537), a connection that Langland will exploit in a variety of ways.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury was famous for the gold and jewels offered by important pilgrims.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Consciousness, moral awareness, related to but not identical with the moral sense personified in line 539.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Exodus 20:12. Beginning in lines 563–64 with the two “great” commandments (Matthew 22:37–39), Piers’s directions include most of the commandments of Exodus 20.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A small enclosed field, or a small agricultural holding worked by a tenant.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A holiday (that is, a holy day) lasted until sunset (“high evening”); it was not supposed to be used for work, and drinking and games were forbidden, at least until after attendance at church services.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A low hillock or a burial mound.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: From a service commemorating the Virgin Mary.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: See Mark 10:15: “whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.” This childlike quality is here envisaged as total submissiveness. “In a chain of charity”: either Truth is bound by (that is, constrained by) *caritas* (love) or Truth is enthroned, adorned with *caritas* like a chain of office.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Prostitute. “Brevets”: pardoner’s credentials.[Return to reference 2](#)

Notes

- °: *pilgrim*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reason*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *battlements*[Return to reference °](#)

Passus 6

[THE PLOWING OF PIERS'S HALF-ACRE]

“This would be a bewildering way unless we had a
guide
Who could trace our way foot by foot”: thus these
folk complained.
Said Perkin³ the Plowman, “By Saint Peter of Rome!
I have a half-acre to plow by the highway;
If I had plowed this half-acre and afterwards sowed
5 it,
I would walk along with you and show you the way
to go.”
“That would be a long delay,” said a lady in a veil.
“What ought we women to work at meanwhile?”
“Some shall sew sacks to stop the wheat from
spilling.
And you lovely ladies, with your long fingers,
10 See that you have silk and sendal to sew when
you’ve time
Chasubles⁴ for chaplains for the Church’s honor.
Wives and widows, spin wool and flax;
Make cloth, I counsel you, and teach the craft to
your daughters.
The needy and the naked, take note how they fare:
15 Keep them from cold with clothing, for so Truth
wishes.
For I shall supply their sustenance unless the soil
fails
As long as I live, for the Lord’s love in Heaven.
And all sorts of folk that feed on farm products,
Busily abet him who brings forth your food.”
20

“By Christ!” exclaimed a knight then, “your counsel
is the best.
But truly, how to drive a team has never been taught
me.
But show me,” said the knight, “and I shall study
plowing.”
“By Saint Paul,” said Perkin, “since you proffer help
so humbly,
25 I shall sweat and strain and sow for us both,
And also labor for your love all my lifetime,
In exchange for your championing Holy Church and
me
Against wasters and wicked men who would destroy
me.
And go hunt hardily hares and foxes,
Boars and bucks that break down my hedges,
30 And have falcons at hand to hunt down the birds
That come to my croft^o and crop my wheat.”
Thoughtfully the knight then spoke these words:
“By my power, Piers, I pledge you my word
To uphold this obligation though I have to fight.
35 As long as I live I shall look after you.”
“Yes, and yet another point,” said Piers, “I pray you
further:
See that you trouble no tenant unless Truth
approves,
And though you may amerce⁵ him, let Mercy set the
fine,
And Meekness be your master no matter what
40 Meed^o does.
And though poor men proffer you presents and gifts,
Don’t accept them for it’s uncertain that you deserve
to have them.
For at some set time you’ll have to restore them
In a most perilous place called purgatory.

45 And treat no bondman badly—you'll be the better for
it;
Though here he is your underling, it could happen in
Heaven
That he'll be awarded a worthier place, one with
more bliss:
*Friend, go up higher.*⁶
For in the charnelhouse⁷ at church churls are hard to
distinguish,
Or a knight from a knave: know this in your heart.
And see that you're true of your tongue, and as for
50 tales—hate them
Unless they have wisdom and wit for your workmen's
instruction.
Avoid foul-mouthed fellows and don't be friendly to
their stories,
And especially at your repasts shun people like them,
For they tell the Fiend's fables—be very sure of that."
"I assent, by Saint James," said the knight then,
55 "To work by your word while my life lasts."
"And I shall apparel myself," said Perkin, "in pilgrims'
fashion
And walk along the way with you till we find Truth."
He donned his working-dress, some darned, some
whole,
60 His gaiters and his gloves to guard his limbs from
cold,
And hung his seed-holder behind his back instead of
a knapsack:
"Bring a bushel of bread-wheat for me to put in it,
For I shall sow it myself and set out afterwards
On a pilgrimage as palmers do to procure pardon.
And whoever helps me plow or work in any way
65 Shall have leave, by our Lord, to glean my land in
harvest-time,

And make merry with what he gets, no matter who
 grumbles.
 And all kinds of craftsmen that can live in truth,
 I shall provide food for those that faithfully live,
 Except for Jack the juggler and Jonette from the
 70 brothel,
 And Daniel the dice-player and Denot the pimp,
 And Friar Faker and folk of his order,
 And Robin the ribald for his rotten speech.
 Truth told me once and bade me tell it abroad:
 75 *Deleantur de libro viventium*:⁸ I should have no
 dealings with them,
 For Holy Church is under orders to ask no tithes⁹ of
 them.
*For let them not be written with the righteous.*¹
 Their good luck has left them, the Lord amend them
 now."
 Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To was Piers's wife's
 name;
 His daughter was called Do-Just-So-Or-Your-Dame-
 Will-Beat-You;
 His son was named Suffer-Your-Sovereigns-To-Have-
 80 Their-Will-
 Condemn-Them-Not-For-If-You-Do-You'll-Pay-A-Dear-
 Price-
 Let-God-Have-His-Way-With-All-Things-For-So-His-
 Word-Teaches.
 "For now I am old and hoary and have something of
 my own,
 To penance and to pilgrimage I'll depart with these
 others;
 85 Therefore I will, before I go away, have my will
 written:
*'In Dei nomine, amen,*² I make this myself.
 He shall have my soul that has deserved it best,

And defend it from the Fiend—for so I believe—
Till I come to his accounting, as my Creed teaches
me—
90 To have release and remission I trust in his rent
book.
The kirk^o shall have my corpse and keep my bones,
For of my corn and cattle it craved the tithe:
I paid it promptly for peril of my soul;
It is obligated, I hope, to have me in mind
95 And commemorate me in its prayers among all
Christians.
My wife shall have what I won with truth, and
nothing else,
And parcel it out among my friends and my dear
children.
For though I die today, my debts are paid;
I took back what I borrowed before I went to bed.
100 As for the residue and the remnant, by the Rood of
Lucca,³
I will worship Truth with it all my lifetime,
And be his pilgrim at the plow for poor men's sake.
My plowstaff shall be my pikestaff and push at the
roots
And help my coulter to cut and cleanse the farrows.”
105 Now Perkin and the pilgrims have put themselves
to plowing.
Many there helped him to plow his half-acre.
Ditchers and diggers dug up the ridges;
Perkin was pleased by this and praised them warmly.
There were other workmen who worked very hard:
110 Each man in his manner made himself a laborer,
And some to please Perkin pulled up the weeds.
At high prime⁴ Piers let the plow stand
To oversee them himself; whoever worked best
Should be hired afterward, when harvest-time came.

115 Then some sat down and sang over ale
And helped plow the half-acre with "Ho! trolly-lolly!"⁵
"Now by the peril of my soul!" said Piers in pure
wrath,
"Unless you get up again and begin working now,
No grain that grows here will gladden you at need,
And though once off the dole you die, let the Devil
120 care!"
Then fakers were afraid and feigned to be blind;
Some set their legs askew as such loafers can
And made their moan to Piers, how they might not
work:
"We have no limbs to labor with, Lord, we thank
you;
But we pray for you, Piers, and for your plow as well,
125 That God of his grace make your grain multiply,
And reward you for whatever alms you will give us
here,
For we can't strain and sweat, such sickness afflicts
us."
"If what you say is so," said Piers, "I'll soon find
out.
I know you're ne'er-do-wells, and Truth knows
130 what's right,
And I'm his sworn servant and so should warn him
Which ones they are in this world that do his
workmen harm.
You waste what men win with toil and trouble.
But Truth shall teach you how his team should be
driven,
Or you'll eat barley bread and use the brook for
135 drink;
Unless you're blind or broken-legged, or bolted^o with
iron—
Those shall eat as well as I do, so God help me,

Till God of his goodness gives them strength to
arise.
But you could work as Truth wants you to and earn
wages and bread
140 By keeping cows in the field, the corn from the
cattle,
Making ditches or dikes or dinging on sheaves,
Or helping make mortar, or spreading muck afield.
You live in lies and lechery and in sloth too,
And it's only for suffrance that vengeance has not
fallen on you.
145 But anchorites and hermits that eat only at noon
And nothing more before the morrow, they shall
have my alms,
And buy copes⁶ at my cost—those that have cloisters
and churches.
But Robert Runabout shall have no rag from me,
Nor 'Apostles' unless they can preach and have the
bishop's permission.
150 They shall have bread and boiled greens and a bit
extra besides,
For it's an unreasonable religious life that has no
regular meals."
Then Waster waxed angry and wanted to fight;
To Piers the Plowman he proffered his glove.
A Breton, a braggart, he bullied Piers too,
And told him to go piss with his plow, peevish
155 wretch.
"Whether you're willing or unwilling, we will have our
will
With your flour and your flesh, fetch it when we
please,
And make merry with it, no matter what you do."
Then Piers the Plowman complained to the knight

To keep him safe, as their covenant was, from
cursed rogues,
"And from these wolfish wasters that lay waste the
world,
For they waste and win nothing, and there will never
be
Plenty among the people while my plow stands idle."
Because he was born a courteous man the knight
spoke kindly to Waster
And warned him he would have to behave himself
165 better:
"Or you'll pay the penalty at law, I promise, by my
order!"
"It's not my way to work," said Waster, "I won't
begin now!"
And made light of the law and lighter of the knight,
And said Piers wasn't worth a pea or his plow either,
And menaced him and his men if they met again.
170 "Now by the peril of my soul!" said Piers, "I'll
punish you all."
And he whooped after Hunger who heard him at
once.
"Avenge me on these vagabonds," said he, "that vex
the whole world."
Then Hunger in haste took hold of Waster by the
belly
And gripped him so about the guts that his eyes
175 gushed water.
He buffeted the Breton about the cheeks
That he looked like a lantern all his life after.
He beat them both so that he almost broke their
guts.
Had not Piers with a pease loaf [7](#) prayed him to leave
off

They'd have been dead and buried deep, have no
doubt about it.
"Let them live," he said, "and let them feed with
hogs,
Or else on beans and bran baked together."
Fakers for fear fled into barns
And flogged sheaves with flails from morning till
evening,
So that Hunger wouldn't be eager to cast his eye on
185 them.
For a potful of peas that Piers had cooked
A heap of hermits laid hands on spades
And cut off their copes and made short coats of
them
And went like workmen to weed and to mow,
And dug dirt and dung to drive off Hunger.
190 Blind and bedridden got better by the thousand;
Those who sat to beg silver were soon healed,
For what had been baked for Bayard⁸ was boon to
many hungry,
And many a beggar for beans obediently labored,
And every poor man was well pleased to have peas
195 for his wages,
And what Piers prayed them to do they did as
sprightly as sparrowhawks.
And Piers was proud of this and put them to work,
And gave them meals and money as they might
deserve.
Then Piers had pity and prayed Hunger to take his
way
Off to his own home and hold there forever.
200 "I'm well avenged on vagabonds by virtue of you.
But I pray you, before you part," said Piers to
Hunger,

“With beggars and street-beadsmen⁹ what’s best to
be done?
For well I know that once you’re away, they will work
badly;
Misfortune makes them so meek now,
205 And it’s for lack of food that these folk obey me.
And they’re my blood brothers, for God bought^o us
all.
Truth taught me once to love them every one
And help them with everything after their needs.
Now I’d like to learn, if you know, what line I should
210 take
And how I might overmaster them and make them
work.”
“Hear now,” said Hunger, “and hold it for wisdom:
Big bold beggars that can earn their bread,
With hounds’ bread and horses’ bread hold up their
hearts,
And keep their bellies from swelling by stuffing them
215 with beans—
And if they begin to grumble, tell them to get to
work,
And they’ll have sweeter suppers once they’ve
deserved them.
And if you find any fellow-man that fortune has
harmed
Through fire or through false men, befriend him if
you can.
Comfort such at your own cost, for the love of Christ
220 in Heaven;
Love them and relieve them—so the law of Kind^o
directs.
Bear ye one another’s burdens¹
And all manner of men that you may find
That are needy or naked and have nothing to spend,

225 With meals or with money make them the better.
Love them and don't malign them; let God take
vengeance.
Though they behave ill, leave it all up to God
*Vengeance is mine and I will repay.*²
And if you want to gratify God, do as the Gospel
teaches,
And get yourself loved by lowly men: so you'll
unloose his grace."
*Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of
unrighteousness.*³
"I would not grieve God," said Piers, "for all the
goods on earth!
Might I do as you say without sin?" said Piers then.
230 "Yes, I give you my oath," said Hunger, "or else the
Bible lies:
Go to Genesis the giant, engenderer of us all:⁴
*In sudore*⁵ and slaving you shall bring forth your
food
And labor for your livelihood, and so our Lord
commanded.
And Sapience says the same—I saw it in the Bible.
235 *Piger propter frigus*⁶ would plow no field;
He shall be a beggar and none abate his hunger.
Matthew with man's face⁷ mouths these words:
'Entrusted with a talent, *servus nequam*⁸ didn't try to
use it,
And earned his master's ill-will for evermore after,
240 And he took away his talent who was too lazy to
work,
And gave it to him in haste that had ten already;
And after he said so that his servants heard it,
He that has shall have, and help when he needs it,
And he that nothing has shall nothing have and no
245 man help him,

And what he trusts he's entitled to I shall take away.
Kind Wit wants each one to work,
Either in teaching or tallying or toiling with his
hands,
Contemplative life or active life; Christ wants it too.
The Psalter says in the Psalm of *Beati omnes*,⁹
250 The fellow that feeds himself with his faithful labor,
He is blessed by the Book in body and in soul."
*The labors of thy hands, etc.*¹
"Yet I pray you," said Piers, "*pour charité*,"^o if you
know
Any modicum of medicine, teach me it, dear sir.
For some of my servants and myself as well
255 For a whole week do no work, we've such aches in
our stomachs."
"I'm certain," said Hunger, "what sickness ails you.
You've munched down too much: that's what makes
you groan,
But I assure you," said Hunger, "if you'd preserve
your health,
260 You must not drink any day before you've dined on
something.
Never eat, I urge you, ere Hunger comes upon you
And sends you some of his sauce to add savor to the
food;
And keep some till suppertime, and don't sit too
long;
Arise up ere Appetite has eaten his fill.
Let not Sir Surfeit sit at your table;
265 Love him not for he's a lecher whose delight is his
tongue,
And for all sorts of seasoned stuff his stomach
yearns.
And if you adopt this diet, I dare bet my arms
That Physic for his food will sell his furred hood

270 And his Calabrian² cloak with its clasps of gold,
And be content, by my troth, to retire from medicine
And learn to labor on the land lest livelihood fail him.
There are fewer physicians than frauds—reform
them, Lord!—
Their drinks make men die before destiny ordains.”
275 “By Saint Parnel,”³ said Piers, “these are profitable
words.
This is a lovely lesson; the Lord reward you for it!
Take your way when you will—may things be well
with you always!”
“My oath to God!” said Hunger, “I will not go away
Till I’ve dined this day and drunk as well.”
280 “I’ve no penny,” said Piers, “to purchase pullets,
And I can’t get goose or pork; but I’ve got two green
cheeses,
A few curds and cream and a cake of oatmeal,
A loaf of beans and bran baked for my children.
And yet I say, by my soul, I have no salt bacon
Nor any hen’s egg, by Christ, to make ham and
285 eggs,
But scallions aren’t scarce, nor parsley, and I’ve
scores of cabbages,
And also a cow and a calf, and a cart-mare
To draw dung to the field while the dry weather
lasts.
By this livelihood I must live till Lammass⁴ time
When I hope to have harvest in my garden.
290 Then I can manage a meal that will make you
happy.”
All the poor people fetched peasepods;⁵
Beans and baked apples they brought in their skirts,
Chives and chervils and ripe cherries aplenty,
And offered Piers this present to please Hunger with.
295 Hunger ate this in haste and asked for more.

Then poor folk for fear fed Hunger fast,
Proffering leeks and peas, thinking to appease him.
And now harvest drew near and new grain came to
market.⁶

300 Then poor people were pleased and plied Hunger
with the best;
With good ale as Glutton taught they got him to
sleep.

Then Waster wouldn't work but wandered about,
And no beggar would eat bread that had beans in it,
But the best bread or the next best, or baked from
pure wheat,

305 Nor drink any half-penny ale⁷ in any circumstances,
But of the best and the brownest that barmaids sell.
Laborers that have no land to live on but their hands
Deign not to dine today on last night's cabbage.
No penny-ale can please them, nor any piece of
bacon,

310 But it must be fresh flesh or else fried fish,
And that *chaud* or *plus chaud*⁸ so it won't chill their
bellies.

Unless he's hired at high wages he will otherwise
complain;
That he was born to be a workman he'll blame the
time.

Against Cato's counsel he commences to murmur:
315 *Remember to bear your burden of poverty patiently.*⁹
He grows angry at God and grumbles against
Reason,
And then curses the king and all the council after
Because they legislate laws that punish laboring
men.¹

But while Hunger was their master there would none
of them complain
Or strive against the statute,² so sternly he looked.

320 But I warn you workmen, earn wages while you may,
 For Hunger is hurrying hitherward fast.
 With waters he'll awaken Waster's chastisement;
 Before five years are fulfilled such famine shall arise.
 325 Through flood and foul weather fruits shall fail,
 And so Saturn³ says and has sent to warn you:
 When you see the moon amiss and two monks'
 heads,
 And a maid have the mastery, and multiply by eight,⁴
 Then shall Death withdraw and Dearth be justice,
 And Daw the diker⁵ die for hunger,
 330 Unless God of his goodness grants us a truce.

Endnotes

- Note 3: A nickname for Piers, or Peter. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Garments worn by priests to celebrate Mass. "Sendal": a thin, rich form of silk. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Punish with a fine the amount of which is at the discretion of the judge. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Luke 14:10. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A house for dead bodies connected to a church graveyard. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Let them be blotted out of the book of the living (Psalm 69:28 [Vulgate 28:29]). [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Because the money they make is not legitimate income or increase derived from the earth; therefore, they do not owe the tithes, or 10 percent taxes, due the church. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Psalm 69:28 (Vulgate 28:29). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "In the name of God, amen" (Latin), customary beginning of a will. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An ornate crucifix at Lucca in Italy was a popular object of pilgrimage. "Residue and remnant": land had to be left to one's natural heirs, although up to one-third of personal

property (the “residue and remnant”) could be left to the church for Masses for the testator or other purposes; the other two-thirds had to go to the family, one to the widow and the other to the children. Piers’s arrangements seem to leave the wife considerably more latitude.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: 9:00 a.m., or after a substantial part of the day’s work has been done, because laborers start so early.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Presumably the refrain of a popular song (note similarly musical loafers in the Prologue, lines 224–25).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Capes that signify religious callings.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A cheap and coarse grade of bread, the food of those who cannot get better.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Generic name for a horse; a bread made of beans and bran, the coarsest category of bread, was used to feed horses and hounds, but was eaten by people when need was great.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Paid prayer sayers.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Galatians 6:2.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Romans 12:19.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Luke 16:9.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This puzzling epithet has been explained on the grounds that Genesis is the longest book (except for Psalms) in the Bible and that it recounts the creation of humankind.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In the sweat [of thy face shalt thou eat bread] (Latin; Genesis 3:19).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The sluggard [will not plow] by reason of the cold (Latin; Proverbs 20:4). “Sapience”: the biblical “Wisdom Books” attributed to Solomon.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Each of the four Evangelists had his traditional pictorial image, derived partly from the faces of the four creatures in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 1:5–12) and partly from those of the four beasts of the Apocalypse (Revelation 4:7): Matthew was

- represented as a winged man; Mark, a lion; Luke, a winged ox; and John, an eagle.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The wicked servant (Latin; Luke 19:22—see 17–27). “Talent”: valuable coin.[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: Blessed [are] all [who] (Latin; Psalm 128:1 [Vulgate 127:1]).[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: Psalm 128:2 [Vulgate 128:2]. Thou shalt eat the labor of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.[Return to reference 1](#)
 - Note 2: Of gray fur (a special imported squirrel fur).[Return to reference 2](#)
 - Note 3: Who St. Parnel was is obscure; other manuscripts and editions read “By Saint Paul.”[Return to reference 3](#)
 - Note 4: The harvest festival, August 1 (the name derived from Old English *hlaf*, “loaf”), when a loaf made from the first wheat of the season was offered at Mass.[Return to reference 4](#)
 - Note 5: Peas in the pod. These, like most foods in the next lines, are early crops.[Return to reference 5](#)
 - Note 6: Presumably as the new harvest approaches, merchants who have been holding grain for the highest prices release it for sale, because prices are about to tumble.[Return to reference 6](#)
 - Note 7: Weak ale diluted with water; in line 309, laborers are too fussy and will no longer accept even penny ale.[Return to reference 7](#)
 - Note 8: “Hot” or “very hot” (French).[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: From Cato’s *Distichs*, a collection of pithy phrases (3rd or 4th century C.E.) used to teach Latin to beginning students.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: Like so many governments, late 14th-century England responded to inflation and the bargaining power of the relatively scarce laborers with wage and price freezes, which had their usual lack of effect. One way landowners, desperate to obtain enough laborers, tried to get around the wage laws was by offering food as well as cash.[Return to reference 1](#)
 - Note 2: That is, anti-inflationary legislation.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Planet thought to influence the weather, generally perceived as hostile.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This cryptic prophecy has never been satisfactorily explained; the basic point is that it is apocalyptic.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A laborer who digs dikes and ditches.[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *small enclosed field*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bribery*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *church*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *braced*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Nature*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for charity*[Return to reference °](#)

From *Passus 7*

[PIERS TEARS TRUTH'S PARDON]

Truth heard tell of this and sent word to Piers
To take his team and till the earth,
And procured him a pardon *a poena et a culpa*,⁶
For him and for his heirs for evermore after;
And bade him hold at home and plow his land,
5 And any one who helped him plow or sow,
Or any kind of craft that could help Piers,
Pardon with Piers Plowman Truth has granted.

* * *

"Piers," said a priest then, "your pardon must I
read,
For I'll explain each paragraph to you and put it in
English."
And Piers unfolds the pardon at the priest's prayer,
And I behind them both beheld all the bull.⁷
110 In two lines it lay, and not a letter more,
And was worded this way in witness of truth:
*They that have done good shall go into life
everlasting;*
*And they that have done evil into everlasting fire.*⁸
"Peter!" said the priest then, "I can find no pardon
115 here—
Only 'Do well, and have well,' and God will have your
soul,
And 'Do evil, and have evil,' and hope nothing else
But that after your death-day the Devil will have
your soul."
And Piers for pure wrath pulled it in two

120 And said, "*Though I walk in the midst of the shadow
of death*
*I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.*⁹
 I shall cease my sowing and not work so hard,
 Nor be henceforth so busy about my livelihood.
 My plow shall be of penance and of prayers
 hereafter,
 125 And I'll weep when I should work, though wheat
bread fails me.
 The prophet¹ ate his portion in penance and sorrow
 As the Psalter says, and so did many others.
 Who loves God loyally, his livelihood comes easy.
*My tears have been my bread day and night.*²
 And unless Luke lies, he finds another lesson for us
 In birds that are not busy about their belly-joy:
 130 '*Ne solliciti sitis,*³ he says in the Gospel,
 And shows us examples by which to school
ourselves.
 The fowls in the firmament, who feeds them in
 winter?
 When the frost freezes they forage for food,
 They have no granary to go to, but God feeds them
 135 all."
 "What!" said the priest to Perkin, "Peter, it would
seem
 You are lettered a little. Who lessoned you in
 books?"
 "Abstinence the abbess taught me my a b c,
 And Conscience came after and counseled me
 better."
 140 "If you were a priest, Piers," said he, "you might
preach when you pleased
 As a doctor of divinity, with *Dixit insipiens,*⁴ as your
text."

“Unlearned lout!” said Piers, “you know little of the Bible;

Solomon’s sayings are seldom your reading.”

*Cast out the scornors and contentions with them, lest they increase.*⁵

145 The priest and Perkin opposed each other,
And through their words I awoke and looked
everywhere about,

And saw the sun sit due south at that time.

Meatless and moneyless on Malvern Hills,

Musing on my dream, I walked a mile-way.

Endnotes

- Note 6:

This pardon has remained one of the most controversial elements of the poem. “From punishment and from guilt” is a formula indicating an absolute pardon. Strictly speaking, remissions obtained by pilgrimages (and pardons dispensed by pardoners in return for donations) could remit only the *punishment* for sin; note that even Truth’s pardon does both only for some people. Christ alone, through the Atonement, had the power to absolve repentant sinners from the *guilt* and delegated it to St. Peter and to the Church through the apostolic succession to be dispensed in the sacrament of confession and in penance. (This pardon also covers, according to another legal formula in the next line, Piers’s heirs, which ordinary pardons could not.) The belief, however, that indulgences (especially those obtained from the pope himself) absolved guilt as well as punishment was widespread.

[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: A document issued by the pope and sealed with his *bull*, or seal.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: From the Athanasian Creed, based on Matthew 25:31–46.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Psalm 23:4 (Vulgate 22:4).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: David, whose Psalm is quoted below.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Psalm 42:3 (Vulgate 41:4).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: "Take no thought [for your life]" (Latin): Matthew 6:25; also Luke 12:22.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "The fool hath said [in his heart, There is no God]" (Latin): Psalm 14:1 (Vulgate 13:1).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See Proverbs 22:10.[Return to reference 5](#)

Passus 18

[THE CRUCIFIXION AND HARROWING OF HELL]

Wool-chafed⁶ and wet-shoed I went forth after
Like a careless creature unconscious of woe,
And trudged forth like a tramp, all the time of my
life,
Till I grew weary of the world and wished to sleep
again,
And lay down till Lent, and slept a long time,
5 Rested there, snoring roundly, till *Ramis-Palmarum*.⁷
I dreamed chiefly of children and cheers of "*Gloria,*
laus!"
And how old folk to an organ sang "*Hosanna!*"
And of Christ's passion and pain for the people he
had reached for.
10 One resembling the Samaritan⁸ and somewhat Piers
the Plowman
Barefoot on an ass's back bootless came riding
Without spurs or spear: sprightly was his look,
As is the nature of a knight that draws near to be
dubbed,
To get himself gilt spurs and engraved jousting
shoes.
15 Then was Faith watching from a window and cried,
"*A, fill David!*"
As does a herald of arms when armed men come to
joust.
Old Jews of Jerusalem joyfully sang,
"*Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the*
Lord."
And I asked Faith to reveal what all this affair meant,
And who was to joust in Jerusalem. "Jesus," he said,

20 "And fetch what the Fiend claims, the fruit of Piers
the Plowman."
"Is Piers in this place?" said I; and he pierced me
with his look:
"This Jesus for his gentleness will joust in Piers's
arms,
In his helmet and in his hauberk, *humana natura*,⁹
So that Christ be not disclosed here as *consummatus*
Deus.¹
25 In the plate armor of Piers the Plowman this jouster
will ride,
For no dint will do him injury as *in deitate Patris*.²
"Who shall joust with Jesus," said I, "Jews or
Scribes?"³
"No," said Faith, "but the Fiend and False-Doom^o-To-
Die.
Death says he will undo and drag down low
All that live or look upon land or water.
30 Life says that he lies, and lays his life in pledge
That for all that Death can do, within three days he'll
walk
And fetch from the Fiend the fruit of Piers the
Plowman,
And place it where he pleases, and put Lucifer in
bonds,
And beat and bring down burning death forever.
35 *O death, I will be thy death.*"⁴
Then Pilate came with many people, *sedens pro*
tribunali,⁵
To see how doughtily Death should do, and judge
the rights of both.
The Jews and the justice were joined against Jesus,
And all the court cried upon him, "*Crucifige!*"⁶ loud.
Then a plaintiff appeared before Pilate and said,
40 "This Jesus made jokes about Jerusalem's temple,

To have it down in one day and in three days after
Put it up again all new⁷—here he stands who said it
—

And yet build it every bit as big in all dimensions,
As long and as broad both, above and below.”
45 “*Crucifige!*” said a sergeant, “he knows sorcerer’s
tricks.”

“*Tolle! tolle!*”⁸ said another, and took sharp thorns
And began to make a garland out of green thorn,
And set it sorely on his head and spoke in hatred,
50 “*Ave, Rabbi,*” said that wretch, and shot reeds⁹ at
him;

They nailed him with three nails naked on a Cross,
And with a pole put a potion up to his lips
And bade him drink to delay his death and lengthen
his days,
And said, “If you’re subtle, let’s see you help
yourself.

55 If you are Christ and a king’s son, come down from
the Cross!

Then we’ll believe that Life loves you and will not let
you die.”

“*Consummatum est,*”¹ said Christ and started to
swoon,

Piteously and pale like a prisoner dying.
The Lord of Life and of Light then laid his eyelids
together.

60 The day withdrew for dread and darkness covered
the sun;

The wall wavered and split and the whole world
quaked.

Dead men for that din came out of deep graves
And spoke of why that storm lasted so long:

“For a bitter battle,” the dead body said;

65 "Life and Death in this darkness, one destroys the
other.
No one will surely know which shall have the victory
Before Sunday about sunrise"; and sank with that to
earth.
Some said that he was God's son that died so fairly:
*Truly this was the Son of God.*²
And some said he was a sorcerer: "We should see
first
70 Whether he's dead or not dead before we dare take
him down."
Two thieves were there that suffered death that time
Upon crosses beside Christ; such was the common
law.
A constable came forth and cracked both their legs
And the arms afterward of each of those thieves.
But no bastard was so bold as to touch God's body
75 there;
Because he was a knight and a king's son, Nature
decreed that time
That no knave should have the hardiness to lay hand
on him.
But a knight with a sharp spear was sent forth
there
Named Longeus³ as the legend tells, who had long
since lost his sight;
80 Before Pilate and the other people in that place he
waited on his horse.
For all that he might demur, he was made that time
To joust with Jesus, that blind Jew Longeus.
For all who watched there were unwilling, whether
mounted or afoot,
To touch him or tamper with him or take him down
from the Cross,

Except this blind bachelor^o that bore him through
the heart.

The blood sprang down the spear and unsparred⁴ his
eyes.

The knight knelt down on his knees and begged
Jesus for mercy.

"It was against my will, Lord, to wound you so
sorely."

He sighed and said, "Sorely I repent it.

90

For what I here have done, I ask only your grace.
Have mercy on me, rightful Jesu!" and thus
lamenting wept.

Then Faith began fiercely to scorn the false Jews,⁵
Called them cowards, accursed forever.

95

"For this foul villainy, may vengeance fall on you!
To make the blind beat the dead, it was a bully's
thought.

Cursed cowards, no kind of knighthood was it
To beat a dead body with any bright weapon.
Yet he's won the victory in the fight for all his vast
wound,

For your champion jouster, the chief knight of you
all,

100

Weeping admits himself worsted and at the will of
Jesus.

For when this darkness is done, Death will be
vanquished,

And you louts have lost, for Life shall have the
victory;

And your unfettered freedom has fallen into
servitude;

And you churls and your children shall achieve no
prosperity,

105

Nor have lordship over land or have land to till,
But be all barren and live by usury,

Which is a life that every law of our Lord curses.
Now your good days are done as Daniel prophesied;
When Christ came their kingdom's crown should be
lost:

*When the Holy of Holies comes your anointing
shall cease.*⁶

110 What for fear of this adventure and of the false
 Jews

I withdrew in that darkness to *Descendit-ad-*
Inferna,⁷

And there I saw surely *Secundum Scripturas*⁸
Where out of the west a wench,⁹ as I thought,
Came walking on the way—she looked toward hell.
Mercy was that maid's name, a meek thing withal,
115 A most gracious girl, and goodly of speech.
Her sister as it seemed came softly walking
Out of the east, opposite, and she looked westward,
A comely creature and cleanly: Truth was her name.
Because of the virtue that followed her, she was
120 afraid of nothing.

When these maidens met, Mercy and Truth,
Each of them asked the other about this great
wonder,
And of the din and of the darkness, and how the day
lowered,

And what a gleam and a glint glowed before hell.
"I marvel at this matter, by my faith," said Truth,
125 "And am coming to discover what this queer affair
means."

"Do not marvel," said Mercy, "it means only mirth.
A maiden named Mary, and mother without touching
By any kind of creature, conceived through speech
And grace of the Holy Ghost; grew great with child;
130 With no blemish to her woman's body brought him
 into this world.

And that my tale is true, I take God to witness,
Since this baby was born it has been thirty winters,¹
Who died and suffered death this day about midday.
And that is the cause of this eclipse that is closing off
135 the sun,
In meaning that man shall be removed from
darkness
While this gleam and this glow go to blind Lucifer.
For patriarchs and prophets have preached of this
often
That man shall save man through a maiden's help,
And what a tree took away a tree shall restore,²
140 And what Death brought down a death shall raise
up."
"What you're telling," said Truth, "is just a tale of
nonsense.
For Adam and Eve and Abraham and the rest,
Patriarchs and prophets imprisoned in pain,
Never believe that yonder light will lift them up,
145 Or have them out of hell—hold your tongue, Mercy!
Your talk is mere trifling. I, Truth, know the truth,
For whatever is once in hell, it comes out never.
Job the perfect patriarch disproves what you say:
Since in hell there is no redemption."³
Then Mercy most mildly uttered these words:
150 "From observation," she said, "I suppose they shall
be saved,
Because venom destroys venom, and in that I find
evidence
That Adam and Eve shall have relief.
For of all venoms the foulest is the scorpion's:
No medicine may amend the place where it stings
155 Till it's dead and placed upon it—the poison is
destroyed,

The first effect of the venom, through the virtue it
possesses.
So shall this death destroy—I dare bet my life—
All that Death did first through the Devil's tempting.
And just as the beguiler with guile beguiled man
160 first,
So shall grace that began everything make a good
end
And beguile the beguiler—and that's a good trick:
*A trick by which to trick trickery.*⁴
"Now let's be silent," said Truth. "It seems to me I
see
Out of the nip⁵ of the north, not far from here,
Righteousness come running—let's wait right here,
165 For she knows far more than we—she was here
before us both."
"That is so," said Mercy, "and I see here to the
south
Where Peace clothed in patience⁶ comes sportively
this way.
Love has desired her long: I believe surely
That Love has sent her some letter, what this light
170 means
That hangs over hell thus: she will tell us what it
means."
When Peace clothed in patience approached near
them both,
Righteousness did her reverence for her rich clothing
And prayed Peace to tell her to what place she was
going,
And whom she was going to greet in her gay
175 garments.
"My wish is to take my way," said she, "and
welcome them all
Whom many a day I might not see for murk of sin.

Adam and Eve and the many others in hell,
Moses and many more will merrily sing,
And I shall dance to their song: sister, do the same.
180 Because Jesus jousted well, joy begins to dawn.
 *Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh
 in the morning.*⁷

Love who is my lover sent letters to tell me
That my sister Mercy and I shall save mankind,
And that God has forgiven and granted me, Peace,
and Mercy
To make bail for mankind for evermore after.
185 Look, here's the patent," said Peace: "*In pace in
 idipsum:*
And that this deed shall endure, *dormiam et
 requiescam.*"⁸

"What? You're raving," said Righteousness. "You
must be really drunk.
Do you believe that yonder light might unlock hell
And save man's soul? Sister, don't suppose it.
190 At the beginning God gave the judgment himself
That Adam and Eve and all that followed them
Should die downright and dwell in torment after
If they touched a tree and ate the tree's fruit.
Adam afterwards against his forbidding
195 Fed on that fruit and forsook as it were
The love of our Lord and his lore too,
And followed what the Fiend taught and his flesh's
will
Against Reason. I, Righteousness, record this with
Truth,
200 That their pain should be perpetual and no prayer
should help them,
Therefore let them chew as they chose, and let us
not chide, sisters,

For it's misery without amendment, the morsel they
ate."

"And I shall prove," said Peace, "that their pain
must end,

205 And in time trouble must turn into well-being;
For had they known no woe, they'd not have known
well-being;

For no one knows what well-being is who was never
in woe,

Nor what is hot hunger who has never lacked food.

If there were no night, no man, I believe,

Could be really well aware of what day means.

210 Never should a really rich man who lives in rest and
ease

Know what woe is if it weren't for natural death.

So God, who began everything, of his good will

Became man by a maid for mankind's salvation

And allowed himself to be sold to see the sorrow of
dying.

215 And that cures all care and is the first cause of rest,

For until we meet *modicum*,^o I may well avow it,

No man knows, I suppose, what 'enough' means.

Therefore God of his goodness gave the first man

Adam

A place of supreme ease and of perfect joy,

220 And then he suffered him to sin so that he might
know sorrow,

And thus know what well-being is—to be aware of it
naturally.

And afterward God offered himself, and took Adam's
nature,

To see what he had suffered in three separate
places,

Both in Heaven and on earth, and now he heads for
hell,

225 To learn what all woe is like who has learned of all
joy.
So it shall fare with these folk: their folly and their
sin
Shall show them what sickness is—and succor from
all pain.
No one knows what war is where peace prevails,
Nor what is true well-being till 'Woe, alas!' teaches
him."
230 Then was there a wight^o with two broad eyes:
Book was that beaupere's⁹ name, a bold man of
speech.
"By God's body," said this Book, "I will bear witness
That when this baby was born there blazed a star
So that all the wise men in the world agreed with
one opinion
235 That such a baby was born in Bethlehem city
Who should save man's soul and destroy sin.
And all the elements," said the Book, "hereof bore
witness.
The sky first revealed that he was God who formed
all things:
The hosts in Heaven took *stella comata*¹
And tended her like a torch to reverence his birth.
240 The light followed the Lord into the low earth.
The water witnessed that he was God for he walked
on it;
Peter the Apostle perceived his walking
And as he went on the water knew him well and
said,
 '*Bid me come unto thee on the water.*'²
245 And lo, how the sun locked her light in herself
When she saw him suffer that made sun and sea.
The earth for heavy heart because he would suffer

Quaked like a quick^o thing and the rock cracked all
to pieces.
Lo, hell might not hold, but opened when God
suffered,
250 And let out Simeon's sons³ to see him hang on
Cross.
And now shall Lucifer believe it, loath though he is,
For Jesus like a giant with an engine⁴ comes yonder
To break and beat down all that may be against him,
And to have out of hell every one he pleases.
255 And I, Book, will be burnt unless Jesus rises to life
In all the mights of a man and brings his mother joy,
And comforts all his kin, and takes their cares away,
And all the joy of the Jews disjoins and disperses;
And unless they reverence his Rood and his
resurrection
260 And believe on a new law be lost body and soul."
"Let's be silent," said Truth, "I hear and see both
A spirit speaks to hell and bids the portals be
opened."
*Lift up your gates.*⁵
A voice loud in that light cried to Lucifer,
"Princes of this place, unpin and unlock,
For he comes here with crown who is King of Glory."
265 Then Satan⁶ sighed and said to hell,
"Without our leave such a light fetched Lazarus
away:⁷
Care and calamity have come upon us all.
If this King comes in he will carry off mankind
And lead it to where Lazarus is, and with small labor
270 bind me.
Patriarchs and prophets have long prated of this,⁸
That such a lord and a light should lead them all
hence."
"Listen," said Lucifer, "for this lord is one I know;

Both this lord and this light, it's long ago I knew him.
No death may do this lord harm, nor any devil's
275 trickery,
And his way is where he wishes—but let him beware
of the perils.
If he bereaves me of my right he robs me by force.
For by right and by reason the race that is here
Body and soul belongs to me, both good and evil.
For he himself said it who is Sire of Heaven,
280 If Adam ate the apple, all should die
And dwell with us devils: the Lord laid down that
threat.
And since he who is Truth himself said these words,
And since I've possessed them seven thousand
winters,
I don't believe law will allow him the least of them."
285 "That is so," said Satan, "but I'm sore afraid
Because you took them by trickery and trespassed in
his garden,
And in the semblance of a serpent sat upon the
apple tree
And egged them to eat, Eve by herself,
And told her a tale with treasonous words;
290 And so you had them out, and hither at the last."
"It's an ill-gotten gain where guile is at the root,
For God will not be beguiled," said Goblin, "nor
tricked.
We have no true title to them, for it was by treason
they were damned."
"Certainly I fear," said the Fiend,⁹ "lest Truth fetch
295 them out.
These thirty winters, as I think, he's gone here and
there and preached.
I've assailed him with sin, and sometimes asked

Whether he was God or God's son: he gave me short
answer.
And thus he's traveled about like a true man these
two and thirty winters.
300 And when I saw it was so, while she slept I went
To warn Pilate's wife what sort of man was Jesus,¹
For some hated him and have put him to death.
I would have lengthened his life, for I believed if he
died
That his soul would suffer no sin in his sight.
305 For the body, while it walked on its bones, was busy
always
To save men from sin if they themselves wished.
And now I see where a soul comes descending
hitherward
With glory and with great light; God it is, I'm sure.
My advice is we all flee," said the Fiend, "fast away
from here.
310 For we had better not be at all than abide in his
sight.
For your lies, Lucifer, we've lost all our prey.
Through you we fell first from Heaven so high:
Because we believed your lies we all leapt out.
And now for your latest lie we have lost Adam,
315 And all our lordship, I believe, on land and in hell."
*Now shall the prince of this world be cast
out.*²
Again the light bade them unlock, and Lucifer
answered,
*"Who is that?"*³
What lord are you?" said Lucifer. The light at once
replied,
"The King of Glory.
The Lord of might and of main and all manner of
powers:

The Lord of Powers.

Dukes of this dim place, at once undo these gates
That Christ may come in, the Heaven-King's son."
320 And with that breath hell broke along with Belial's
bars;
For^o any warrior or watchman the gates wide
opened.
Patriarchs and prophets, *populus in tenebris*,⁴
Sang Saint John's song, *Ecce agnus Dei*.⁵
Lucifer could not look, the light so blinded him.
325 And those that the Lord loved his light caught away,
And he said to Satan, "Lo, here's my soul in payment
For all sinful souls, to save those that are worthy.
Mine they are and of me—I may the better claim
them.
Although Reason records, and right of myself,
330 That if they ate the apple all should die,
I did not hold out to them hell here forever.
For the deed that they did, your deceit caused it;
You got them with guile against all reason.
For in my palace Paradise, in the person of an adder,
335 You stole by stealth something I loved.
Thus like a lizard with a lady's face⁶
Falsely you filched from me; the Old Law confirms
That guilers be beguiled, and that is good logic:
*A tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye.*⁷
340 *Ergo*⁸ soul shall requite soul and sin revert to sin,
And all that man has done amiss, I, man, will
amend.
Member for member was amends in the Old Law,
And life for life also, and by that law I claim
Adam and all his issue at my will hereafter.
And what Death destroyed in them, my death shall
345 restore
And both quicken^o and requite what was quenched

through sin.
And that grace destroy guile is what good faith
requires.
So don't believe it, Lucifer, against the law I fetch
them,
But by right and by reason here ransom my
liegemen.

*I have not come to destroy the law but to
fulfill it.*⁹

350 You fetched mine in my place unmindful of all reason
Falsely and feloniously; good faith taught me
To recover them by reason and rely on nothing else.
So what you got with guile through grace is won
back.

355 You, Lucifer, in likeness of a loathsome adder
Got by guile those whom God loved;
And I, in likeness of a mortal man, who am master
of Heaven,
Have graciously requited your guile: let guile go
against guile!
And as Adam and all died through a tree
Adam and all through a tree return to life,¹
And guile is beguiled and grief has come to his guile:
360 *And he is fallen into the ditch which he
made.*²

And now your guile begins to turn against you,
And my grace to grow ever greater and wider.
The bitterness that you have brewed, imbibe it
yourself
Who are doctor³ of death, the drink you made.
365 For I who am Lord of Life, love is my drink
And for that drink today I died upon earth.
I struggled so I'm thirsty still for man's soul's sake.
No drink may moisten me or slake my thirst
Till vintage time befall in the Vale of Jehoshaphat,⁴

370 When I shall drink really ripe wine, *Resurrectio*
*mortuorum.*⁵
And then I shall come as a king crowned with angels
And have out of hell all men's souls.
Fiends and fiendkins shall stand before me
And be at my bidding, where best it pleases me.
375 But to be merciful to man then, my nature requires
it.
For we are brothers of one blood, but not in baptism
all.
And all that are both in blood and in baptism my
whole brothers
Shall not be damned to the death that endures
without end.
*Against thee only have I sinned, etc.*⁶
It is not the custom on earth to hang a felon
Oftener than once, even though he were a traitor.
380 And if the king of the kingdom comes at that time
When a felon should suffer death or other such
punishment,
Law would he give him life if he looks upon him.⁷
And I who am King of Kings shall come in such a
time
Where doom to death damns all wicked,
385 And if law wills I look on them, it lies in my grace
Whether they die or do not die because they did evil.
And if it be any bit paid for, the boldness of their
sins,
I may grant mercy through my righteousness and all
my true words;
And though Holy Writ wills that I wreak vengeance
390 on those that wrought evil,
*No evil unpunished, etc.*⁸
They shall be cleansed and made clear and cured of
their sins,

In my prison purgatory till *Parce!*⁸ says 'Stop!'
 And my mercy shall be shown to many of my half-
 brothers,
 For blood-kin may see blood-kin both hungry and
 cold,
 But blood-kin may not see blood-kin bleed without
 395 his pity:
 *I heard unspeakable words which it is not
 lawful for a man to utter.*⁹
 But my righteousness and right shall rule all hell
 And mercy rule all mankind before me in Heaven.
 For I'd be an unkind king unless I gave my kin help,
 And particularly at such a time when help was truly
 needed.
 *Enter not into judgment with thy servant.*¹
 Thus by law," said our Lord, "I will lead from here
 400 Those I looked on with love who believed in my
 coming;
 And for your lie, Lucifer, that you lied to Eve,
 You shall buy it back in bitterness"—and bound him
 with chains.
 Ashtoreth and all the gang hid themselves in
 corners;
 They dared not look at our Lord, the least of them
 405 all,
 But let him lead away what he liked and leave what
 he wished.
 Many hundreds of angels harped and sang,
 *Flesh sins, flesh redeems, flesh reigns as God
 of God.*²
 Then Peace piped a note of poetry:
 *As a rule the sun is brighter after the biggest
 clouds; After hostilities love is brighter.*
 "After sharp showers," said Peace, "the sun shines
 brightest;

410 No weather is warmer than after watery clouds;
Nor any love lovelier, or more loving friends,
Than after war and woe when Love and peace are
masters.
There was never war in this world nor wickedness so
sharp
That Love, if he liked, might not make a laughing
matter.
And peace through patience puts an end to all
415 perils."
"Truce!" said Truth, "you tell the truth, by Jesus!
Let's kiss in covenant, and each of us clasp other."
"And let no people," said Peace, "perceive that we
argued;
For nothing is impossible to him that is almighty."
"You speak the truth," said Righteousness, and
420 reverently kissed her,
Peace, and Peace her, *per saecula saeculorum*:³
Mercy and Truth have met together;
Righteousness and Peace have kissed each
*other.*⁴
Truth sounded a trumpet then and sang *Te Deum*
Laudamus,⁵
And then Love strummed a lute with a loud note:
*Behold how good and how pleasant, etc.*⁶
Till the day dawned these damsels caroled.
When bells rang for the Resurrection, and right then
425 I awoke
And called Kit my wife and Calote my daughter:
"Arise and go reverence God's resurrection,
And creep to the Cross on knees, and kiss it
as a jewel,
For God's blessed body it bore for our good,
And it frightens the Fiend, for such is its power
430 That no grisly ghost may glide in its shadow."

Endnotes

- Note 6: Scratchy wool was worn next to the body as an act of penance.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:
Palm Sunday (literally, “branches of palms” in Latin): the background of this part of the poem is the biblical account of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on this day, when the crowds greeted him crying, “Hosanna (line 8) to the son of David (line 15): Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord (line 17a); Hosanna in the highest” (see Matthew 21:9). “*Gloria, laus*” (line 7) are the first words of a Latin anthem, “Glory, praise, and honor,” that was sung by children in medieval religious processions on Palm Sunday.
[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In the previous vision, the Dreamer has encountered Abraham, or Faith (mentioned in lines 15, 18, 28, and 92); Moses, or Hope; and the Good Samaritan, or Charity, who was riding toward a “jousting in Jerusalem” and who now appears as an aspect of Christ.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Human nature (Latin), which Christ assumed in order to redeem humanity. “Hauberk”: coat of mail.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The perfect (three-personed) God (Latin).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the godhead of the Father (Latin): as God, Christ could not suffer but as man, he could.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: People who made a very strict, literal interpretation of the Old Law and hence rejected teaching of the New.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Hosea 13:14.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Sitting as a judge (Latin; see Matthew 27:19).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Crucify him! (Latin; John 19:15).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See John 2:19–21 and Mark 14:58–59.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Away with him, away with him! (Latin; John 19:15).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Arrows, probably small ones intended to hurt rather than to kill. "Ave, Rabbi": "Hail, master" (Latin; Matthew 26:49): these are actually Judas's words when he kissed Christ in order to identify him to the arresting officers.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It is finished (Latin; John 19:30).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Matthew 27:54.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Longeus (usually Longinus) appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, which provided Langland with the material for much of his account of Christ's despoiling of hell.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Opened; in the original there is a play on words with "spear."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5:
In this passage (lines 92–110) and in lines 258–60, Langland participates in a well-established tradition of Christian anti-Judaism; for more on this ideology and its violence, see "Religious Exclusions and Identities" (pp. 285–362). Like other Christian thinkers, Langland sometimes identifies with, and praises, Jewish figures—for instance, in a passage where he holds up Jewish charity as an example to Christians—in addition to condemning them. In the present passage he may intend to distinguish between those who condemned Jesus and the "old Jews of Jerusalem" who welcomed him in the Palm Sunday procession (lines 7–17).
[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Daniel 9:24–26.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: He descended into hell (Latin; from the Apostles' Creed).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: According to the scriptures (Latin).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The word is Langland's and had much the same connotations in his time as it has in ours.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: See Luke 3:23.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The first tree bore the fruit that Adam and Eve ate, thereby damning humankind; the second tree is the cross on

which Christ was crucified, thereby redeeming humankind.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: See Job 7:9.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: From a medieval Latin hymn.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The word is Langland's and the sense obscure; it probably meant "coldness" to him, although an Old English word similar to *nip* meant "gloom."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: What Langland envisioned clothes of patience to look like, aside from their "richness" (line 173), it is impossible to say; to him any abstraction could become a concrete allegory without visual identification.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Psalm 30:5 (Vulgate 29:6).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The "patent" or "deed" is a document conferring authority: this one consists of Latin phrases from Psalm 4:8 (Vulgate 4:9): "In peace in the selfsame"; "I will sleep and find rest."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Fine fellow (French). The book's two broad eyes suggest the Old and New Testaments.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Hairy star (Latin), that is, comet.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Matthew 14:28.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Simeon, who was present at the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple, had been told by the Holy Ghost that "he should not see death" before he had seen "the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). The Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus echoes the incident in reporting that Simeon's sons were raised from death at the time of Jesus's crucifixion.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A device, probably thought of as a gigantic slingshot, although, of course, Christ needs nothing to break down his enemies but his own authority.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The first words of Psalm 24:9 (Vulgate 23:9), which reads in the Latin version, "Lift up your gates, O princes, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6:

Langland, following a tradition also reflected in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, pictures hell as populated by a number of devils: Satan; Lucifer (line 273 ff.), who began the war in heaven and tempted Eve; Goblin (line 293); Belial (line 321); and Ashtoreth (line 404). Lucifer the rebel angel naturally became identified with Satan, a word that in the Old Testament had originally meant an evil adversary; many of the other devils are displaced gods of pagan religions.

[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: For Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead, see John 11.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: For example, Psalm 68:18 (Vulgate 67:19), as interpreted in Ephesians 4:8–10.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Here and in line 309, "the Fiend" is presumably Lucifer's most articulate critic, Satan, whom Christ names as his tempter in Matthew 4:10.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In Matthew 27:19, Pilate's wife warns Pilate to "have nothing to do with that just man [Jesus]," for she has been troubled by a dream about him. Langland has the Fiend admit to having caused the dream so that Pilate's wife should persuade her husband not to harm Jesus and thus keep him safe on earth and not come to visit hell and despoil it.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: John 12:31. "Prince of this world" is a title for the devil.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This and the next two phrases are from Psalm 24:8 (Vulgate 23:9), following immediately on the words quoted in line 262a.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "People in darkness"; the phrase is from Matthew 4:16, citing Isaiah 9:2: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Behold the Lamb of God (Latin; John 1.36).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In medieval art, the devil tempting Eve was sometimes represented as a snake (see the "serpent" of line 288) and

sometimes as a lizard with a female human face and standing upright.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: See Matthew 5:38 citing Exodus 21:24.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Therefore. The Latin conjunction was used in formal debate to introduce the conclusion derived from a number of propositions.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: See Matthew 5:17.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: See 1 Corinthians 15:21–22.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Psalm 7:15 (Vulgate 7:16).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The ironic use of the word carries the sense both of “physician” and of “one learned in a discipline.”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: On the evidence of Joel 3:2, 12, the site of the Last Judgment was thought to be the Vale of Jehoshaphat.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The resurrection of the dead (from the Nicene Creed).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Psalm 51:4 (Vulgate 50:6). The psalm is understood to assign the sole power of judging the sinner to God, because it is only against God that the sinner has acted.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, “Law dictates that the king pardon the felon if the king sees him.”[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: [He is a just judge who leaves] no evil unpunished [and no good unrewarded]. Not from the Bible but from Pope Innocent III’s tract *Of Contempt for the World* (1195).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9:
In 2 Corinthians 12:4, St. Paul tells how in a vision he was snatched up to heaven where he heard things that may not be repeated among men. Langland is apparently invoking a similar mystic experience when he puts into Christ’s mouth a promise to spare many of his half-brothers, the unbaptized. The orthodox theology of the time taught that all the unbaptized were irredeemably damned, a proposition Langland refused to accept: in his vision he has heard words to the contrary that

might not be repeated among men, because they would be held heretical.

[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Psalm 143:2 (Vulgate 142:2).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: From a medieval Latin hymn. The source of the two Latin verses immediately below is Alain of Lille, a late 12th-century poet and philosopher.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: For ever and ever (the Latin liturgical formula).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Psalm 85:10 (Vulgate 84:11).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: We praise thee, O Lord (Latin).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Psalm 133:1 (Vulgate 132:1). The verse continues, "it is for brothers to dwell together in unity."[Return to reference 6](#)

Notes

- °: *sentence*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knight*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small quantity*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *creature, person*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *living*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in spite of*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *revitalize*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Spare!*[Return to reference °](#)

From *The C-Text*

[THE DREAMER MEETS CONSCIENCE AND REASON]⁷

Thus I awoke, as God's my witness, when I lived
in Cornhill,⁸
Kit and I in a cottage, clothed like a loller,⁹
And little beloved, believe you me,
Among lollers of London and illiterate hermits.
For I wrote rhymes of those men as Reason taught
5 me.
For as I came by Conscience I met with Reason,
In a hot harvest time when I had my health,
And limbs to labor with, and loved good living,
And to do no deed but to drink and sleep.
My body sound, my mind sane, a certain one
10 accosted me;
Roaming in remembrance, thus Reason upbraided
me:
"Can you serve," he said, "or sing in a church?
Or cock hay with my hay-makers, or heap it on the
cart,
Mow it or stack what's mown or make binding for
sheaves?
Or have a horn and be a hedge-guard and lie
15 outdoors at night,
And keep my corn in my field from cattle and
thieves?
Or cut cloth or shoe-leather, or keep sheep and
cattle,
Mend hedges, or harrow, or herd pigs or geese,
Or any other kind of craft that the commons needs,

So that you might be of benefit to your bread-providers?"

"Certainly!" I said, "and so God help me,
I am too weak to work with sickle or with scythe,
And too long,¹ believe me, for any low stooping,
Or laboring as a laborer to last any while."

25 "Then have you lands to live by," said Reason, "or
 relations with money
To provide you with food? For you seem an idle man,
A spendthrift who thrives on spending, and throws
time away.

Or else you get what food men give you going door
to door,

Or beg like a fraud on Fridays² and feastdays in
churches.

30 And that's a loller's life that earns little praise
Where Rightfulness rewards men as they really
deserve.

*He shall reward every man according to his
works.*³

Or are you perhaps lame in your legs or other limbs
of your body,

Or maimed through some misadventure, so that you
might be excused?"

35 "When I was young, many years ago,
My father and my friends provided me with
schooling,

Till I understood surely what Holy Scripture meant,
And what is best for the body as the Book tells,
And most certain for the soul, if so I may continue.
And, in faith, I never found, since my friends died,
Life that I liked save in these long clothes.⁴

40 And if I must live by labor and earn my livelihood,
The labor I should live by is the one I learned best.

*[Abide] in the same calling wherein you were
called.*⁵

And so I live in London and upland⁶ as well.
The tools that I toil with to sustain myself
Are Paternoster and my primer, *Placebo* and *Dirige*,⁷
45 And sometimes my Psalter and my seven Psalms.
These I say for the souls of such as help me.
And those who provide my food vouchsafe, I think,
To welcome me when I come, once a month or so,
Now with him, now with her, and in this way I beg
50 Without bag or bottle but my belly alone.

And also, moreover, it seems to me, sir Reason,
No clerk should be constrained to do lower-class
work.

For by the law of Leviticus⁸ that our Lord ordained
Clerks with tonsured crowns should, by common
55 understanding,
Neither strain nor sweat nor swear at inquests,
Nor fight in a vanguard and defeat an enemy:

*Do not render evil for evil.*⁹

For they are heirs of Heaven, all that have the
tonsure,
And in choir and in churches they are Christ's
ministers.

*The Lord is the portion of my inheritance. And
elsewhere, Mercy does not constrain.*¹

It is becoming for clerks to perform Christ's service,
60 And untonsured boys be burdened with bodily labor.
For none should acquire clerk's tonsure unless he
claims descent
From franklins² and free men and folk properly
wedded.

Bondmen and bastards and beggars' children—
These belong to labor; and lords' kin should serve
65 God and good men as their degree requires,

Some to sing Masses or sit and write,
Read and receive what Reason ought to spend.
But since bondmen's boys have been made bishops,
And bastards' boys have been archdeacons,
70 And shoemakers and their sons have through silver
become knights,
And lords' sons their laborers whose lands are
mortgaged to them—
And thus for the right of this realm they ride against
our enemies
To the comfort of the commons and to the king's
honor—
75 And monks and nuns on whom mendicants must
depend
Have had their kin named knights and bought
knight's-fees,³
And popes and patrons have shunned poor gentle
blood
And taken the sons of Simon Magus⁴ to keep the
sanctuary,
Life-holiness and love have gone a long way hence,
And will be so till this is all worn out or otherwise
80 changed.
Therefore proffer me no reproach, Reason, I pray
you,
For in my conscience I conceive what Christ wants
me to do.
Prayers of a perfect man and appropriate penance
Are the labor that our Lord loves most of all.
85 "*Non de solo*," I said, "*forsooth vivit homo*,
Nec in pane et in pabulo;⁵ the Paternoster witnesses
*Fiat voluntas Dei*⁶—that provides us with everything."
Said Conscience, "By Christ, I can't see that this
lies;^o

But it seems no serious perfectness to be a city-
 beggar,
 Unless you're licensed to collect for prior or
 90 monastery."
 "That is so," I said, "and so I admit
 That at times I've lost time and at times misspent it;
 And yet I hope, like him who has often bargained
 And always lost and lost, and at the last it happened
 He bought such a bargain he was the better ever,
 95 That all his loss looked paltry in the long run,
 Such a winning was his through what grace decreed.
*The kingdom of Heaven is like unto treasure
 hidden in a field. The woman who found
 the piece of silver, etc.*⁷
 So I hope to have of him that is almighty
 A gobbet of his grace, and begin a time
 That all times of my time shall turn into profit."
 100 "And I counsel you," said Reason, "quickly to begin
 The life that is laudable and reliable for the soul."
 "Yes, and continue," said Conscience, and I came
 to the church.⁸

Endnotes

- Note 7: In the C-text, the last of the three versions of *Piers Plowman*, Langland prefixed to the "Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins" (Passus 5 of the B-text) an apology by the Dreamer, "Long Will," who is at once long (or tall) and long on willing (or, arguably, willful). Although there is no conclusive historical evidence for doing so, readers of *Piers Plowman* have generally regarded this passage as a source of information about the real author, about whom we otherwise know so little.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An area of London associated with vagabonds, seedy clerics, and people at loose ends.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Idler, vagabond. The term was eventually applied to the proto-Protestant followers of John Wycliffe. "Kit": refers to "Kit my wife and Calote [Colette] my daughter" (B-text, 18.426). The Dreamer seems to be someone with clerical training who has received consecration into minor clerical orders (such as that of deacon) but who is not a priest. Lesser clerics could marry, although marriage blocked their further advancement in the Church.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, tall, perhaps a pun on "willfulness." The Dreamer is called "Long Will" in B-text, 15.152.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Fast days, because Christ was crucified on a Friday.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Matthew 16:27; see Psalm 62:12 (Vulgate 61:13).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The long dress of a cleric, not limited to actual priests.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See 1 Corinthians 7:20.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the countryside.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: "I will please [the Lord]" and "Make straight [my way]" (Latin; Psalms 116:9 [Vulgate 114:9] and 5:8, respectively). *Placebo* and *Dirige* are the first words of hymns based on two of the seven "penitential" Psalms that were part of the regular order of personal prayer. "Paternoster": the Lord's Prayer ("Our father" in Latin). The "primer" was the basic collection of private prayers for laypeople.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Leviticus 21 sets restrictions on members of the priesthood.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: See 1 Thessalonians 5:15.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, "mercy is not restricted," source unknown. The first sentence quoted is from Psalm 16:5 (Vulgate 15:5).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Freeman. By this date, the term did not just mean nonserfs but designated landowners who were becoming members of the gentry class yet were not knights. The distinction Langland seems to make in this line between

franklins and freemen may reflect the rising status of certain families of “freedmen,” the original meaning of the word *franklins*.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The estate a knight held from his overlord in return for military service was called his “fee.”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Priests who obtained office through bribery or “simony,” a term derived from Simon Magus, a magician who offered the apostles money for their power to perform miracles through the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “Not solely [by bread] doth man live, neither by bread nor by food” (Latin); a slight misquoting of Matthew 4:4, which continues, “but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”: see Deuteronomy 8:3.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: “God’s will be done” (Latin). The Lord’s Prayer reads, “Thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Matthew 13:44, Luke 15:9–10. Both passages come from parables that compare finding the kingdom of heaven to risking everything you have to get the one thing that matters most.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The four lines that follow this passage connect it to the beginning of the second dream (B-text, 5): “And to the church I set off, to honor God; before the Cross, on my knees, I beat my breast, sighing for my sins, saying my Paternoster, weeping and wailing until I fell asleep.”[Return to reference 8](#)

Notes

- °: *is pertinent*[Return to reference °](#)

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

ca. 1375–1400

Between the *Ancrene Wisse* (see [pp. 206–10](#)) and the later fourteenth century, writers deployed English for many genres, especially saints' lives and romances. The finest Arthurian romance in English survives in only one manuscript, which also contains three religious poems—*Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Purity*—generally believed to be by the same poet. Nothing is known about the author except what can be inferred from the works. The dialect of the poems locates them in a remote corner of the northwest midlands between Cheshire and Staffordshire, and details of Sir Gawain's journey north show that the author was familiar with the geography of that region. But if author and audience were provincials, *Sir Gawain* and the other poems in the manuscript reveal them to have been highly sophisticated and well acquainted both with the international culture of the high Middle Ages and with ancient insular traditions.

Sir Gawain belongs to the so-called Alliterative Revival. After the Norman Conquest, alliterative verse doubtless continued to be recited by oral poets. At the beginning, the *Gawain* poet pretends that this romance is an oral poem and asks the audience to "listen" to a story, which he has "heard." Alliterative verse also continued to appear in Early Middle English texts. Layamon's *Brut* (see [p. 140](#)) is the outstanding example. During the late fourteenth century there was a renewed flowering of alliterative poetry, especially in the north

and west of Britain, which includes *Piers Plowman* and a splendid poem known as *The Alliterative Morte Darthur*.

The *Gawain* poet's audience evidently valued the kind of alliterative verse that Chaucer's Parson caricatures as "rum-ram-ruf by letter" (see [p. 571](#), line 43). They would also have understood archaic poetic diction surviving from Old English poetry such as *athel* (noble) and words of Scandinavian origin such as *skete* (quickly) and *skifted* (alternated). They were well acquainted with French Arthurian romances and the latest fashions in clothing, armor, and castle building. In making Sir Gawain, Arthur's sister's son, the preeminent knight of the Round Table, the poet was faithful to an older tradition. The thirteenth-century French romances, which in the next century became the main sources of Sir Thomas Malory, had made Sir Lancelot the best of Arthur's knights and Lancelot's adultery with Queen Guinevere the central event on which the fate of Arthur's kingdom turns. In *Sir Gawain* Lancelot is only one name in a list of Arthur's knights. Arthur is still a youth, and the court is in its springtime. Sir Gawain epitomizes this first blooming of Arthurian chivalry, and the reputation of the court rests upon his shoulders.

Ostensibly, Gawain's head is what is at stake. The main plot belongs to a type that folklorists classify as the "Beheading Game," in which a supernatural challenger offers to let his head be cut off in exchange for a return blow. The earliest written occurrence of this motif is in the Middle Irish tale of *Bricriu's Feast*. The *Gawain* poet could have encountered it in several French romances as well as in oral tradition. But the outcome of the game here does not turn only on the champion's courage as it does in *Bricriu's Feast*. The *Gawain* poet has devised another series of tests for the hero that link the beheading with his truth, the emblem of which is the pentangle—a five-pointed star—displayed on Gawain's coat of arms and shield. The word *truth* in Middle English as in Chaucer's ballade of that name (also called "Balade de bon conseil"; see [p. 574](#)), and in Passus 1 of *Piers Plowman* (see [p. 382](#)), means not only what it still means now—a fact, belief, or idea held to be "true"—but what is conveyed by the old-fashioned variant from the same root: *troth*—that is, faith pledged by one's word and owed to a lord, a spouse, or

anyone who puts someone else under an obligation. In this respect, Sir Gawain is being measured against a moral and Christian ideal of chivalry. Whether or not he succeeds in that contest is a question carefully left unresolved—perhaps as a challenge for the reader.



Baronial Feasting. Limbourg Brothers, "January," from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, ca. 1411–16. This wall hanging depicts the Trojan War as if it were invading the protected space of the duke's feast.

The poet has framed Gawain's adventure with references in the first and last stanzas to what are called the "Brutus books," the foundation stories that trace the origins of Rome and Britain back to the destruction of Troy. See, for example, the headnote on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* ([p. 138](#)). A cyclical sense of history as well as of the cycles of the seasons of the year, the generations of humankind, and of individual lives runs through *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The poem is written in stanzas that contain a group of alliterative lines (the number of lines in a stanza varies). The line is longer and does not contain a fixed number or pattern of stresses like the classical alliterative measure of Old English poetry. Each stanza closes with five short lines rhyming *a b a b a*. The first of these rhyming lines contains just one stress and is called the "bob"; the four three-stress lines that follow are called the "wheel." For details on alliterative verse, see "The Meters of Old and Middle English Poetry" ([pp. 23–24](#)). The opening stanza is printed below in Middle English with an interlinear translation. The stressed alliterating sounds have been italicized.

Sithen the **se**ge and the **a**ssaut was **se**sed at Troye,
After the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,

The **bor**gh **b**rittene and **b**rent to **b**rondes and
ashes,
The city destroyed and burned to brands and ashes,

The **t**ulk that the **t**rammes of **t**resoun ther wrought
The man who the plots of treason there wrought

Was **t**ried for his **t**richerie, the **t**rewest on erthe.
Was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth.

Hit was **E**nnias the **a**thel and his **h**ighe kynde,
It was Aeneas the noble and his high race,

That sithen de**p**reced **p**rovinces, and **p**atrounes
bcome
Who after subjugated provinces, and lords became

Welneghe of al the **w**ele in the **w**est ile.
Wellnigh of all the wealth in the west isles.

Fro **r**iche **R**omulus to **R**ome **r**icchis hym swythe,
Then noble Romulus to Rome proceeds quickly,

With gret **b**obbaunce that **b**urghe he **b**iges upon
fyrst
With great pride that city he builds at first

And **n**evenes hit his aune **n**ome, as hit **n**ow hat;
And names it his own name, as it now is called;

Ticius to **T**uskan and **t**eldes bigynnes,
Ticius (goes) to Tuscany and houses begins,

Langaberde in **L**umbardie **l**yftes up homes,
Longbeard in Lombardy raises up homes,

And **f**er over the **F**rench **f**lod, **F**elix Brutus
And far over the English Channel, Felix Brutus

On mony **b**onkkes ful **b**rode **B**retayn he settes
On many banks very broad Britain he sets

Wyth **w**ynne,
With joy,

Where **w**erre and **w**rake and **w**onder
Where war and strife and wondrous happenings

Bi sythes has wont therinne,
On occasions have dwelled therein

And oft **b**othe **b**lysse and **b**lunder
And often both joy and strife

Ful **s**kete has **s**kyfted synne.
Very swiftly have alternated since.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight^{*}

FITT¹ i

Once the siege and assault of Troy had ceased,
with the city a smoke-heap of cinders and ash,
the traitor who contrived such betrayal there
was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth;²
Aeneas, it was, with his noble warriors
5 who went conquering abroad, laying claim to the
crowns
of the wealthiest kingdoms in the western world.
Mighty Romulus³ quickly careered towards Rome
and conceived a city in magnificent style
which from then until now has been known by his
10 name.
Ticius constructed townships in Tuscany
and Langobard⁴ did likewise building homes in
Lombardy.
And further afield, over the Sea of France,
Felix Brutus⁵ founds Britain on broad banks
15 most grand.
And wonder, dread and war
have lingered in that land
where loss and love in turn
have held the upper hand.
20 After Britain was built by this founding father
a bold race bred there, battle-happy men
causing trouble and torment in turbulent times,

and through history more strangeness has happened
here
than anywhere else I know of on Earth.
But most regal of rulers in the royal line
25 was Arthur, who I heard is honored above all,
and the inspiring story I intend to spin
has moved the hearts and minds of many—
an awesome episode in the legends of Arthur.
So listen a little while to my tale if you will
30 and I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips
from
the tongue;
and as it has been inked
in stories bold and strong,
where loyal letters linked
35 have lasted loud and long.

It was Christmas at Camelot—King Arthur's court,
where the great and the good of the land had
gathered,
the right noble lords of the ranks of the Round Table
all roundly carousing and reveling in pleasure.
40 Time after time, in tournaments of joust,
they had lunged at each other with leveled lances
then returned to the castle to carry on their caroling,
for the feasting lasted a full fortnight and one day,
with more food and drink than a fellow could dream
45 of.
The hubbub of their humor was heavenly to hear:
pleasant dialogue by day and dancing after dusk,
so house and hall were lit with happiness
and lords and ladies were luminous with joy.
With all the wonder in the world they gathered there
50 as one:
the most chivalrous and courteous knights known to
Christendom;

the most wonderful women to have walked in this
world;

the handsomest king to be crowned at court.

All these fair folk in their first age, together in
that hall:

55 most fortunate under heaven,
 with Arthur, that man of high will;
 no bolder band could ever
 be found on field or hill.

60 With New Year so young it still yawned and stretched
 helpings were doubled on the dais that day.

And as king and company were coming to the hall

the choir in the chapel fell suddenly quiet,

then a chorus erupted from the courtiers and clerks:

65 “Noel,” they cheered, then “Noel, Noel,”

 “New Year Gifts!” the knights cried next
 as they pressed forwards to offer their presents,
 teasing with frivolous favors and forfeits,
 till those ladies who lost couldn’t help but laugh,
 and the undefeated were far from forlorn.⁶

70 Their merrymaking rolled on in this manner until
 mealtime,

when, worthily washed, they went to the table,

and were seated in order of honor, as was apt,

with Guinevere in their gathering, gloriously framed

75 at her place on the platform, pricelessly curtained

by silk to each side, and canopied across

with tasteful tapestries of Toulouse and Tharsia,

studded with stones and stunning gems

beyond pocket or purse, beyond what pennies
 could buy.

80 But not one stone outshone
 the quartz of the queen’s eyes;
 with hand on heart, no one
 could argue otherwise.

85 But Arthur would not eat until all were served.
He brimmed with ebullience, being almost boyish
in his love of life, and what he liked the least
was to sit still watching the seasons slip by.
His blood was busy and he buzzed with thoughts,
90 and the matter which played on his mind at that
moment
was his pledge to take no portion from his plate
on such a special day until a story was told:
some far-fetched yarn or outrageous fable,
the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth,
like the action-packed epics of men-at-arms.
95 Or till some chancer had challenged his chosen
knight,
dared him, with a lance, to lay life on the line,
to stare death face-to-face and accept defeat
should fortune or fate smile more favorably on his
foe.
Within Camelot's castle this was the custom,
100 and at feasts and festivals when the fellowship
would meet.
With features proud and fine
he stood there tall and straight,
a king at Christmastime
105 amid great merriment.

And still he stands there just being himself,
chatting away charmingly, exchanging views.
Good Sir Gawain is seated by Guinevere,
and on his other side Agravain the Hard Hand sits,
110 both nephews of the king and notable knights.
At the head of the board sat Bishop Baldwin,
with Ywain, son of Urien, to eat beside him.
First those sitting on the dais⁷ were splendidly
served,

115 then those stalwarts seated on the benches to the
sides.

The first course comes in to the fanfare and clamor
of blasting trumpets hung with trembling banners,
then pounding double-drums and dinning pipes,
weird sounds and wails of such warbled wildness
120 that to hear and feel them made the heart float free.
Flavorsome delicacies of flesh were fetched in
and the freshest of foods, so many in fact
there was scarcely space to present the stews
or to set the soups in the silver bowls on
the cloth.

125 Each guest received his share
of bread or meat or broth;
a dozen plates per pair—
plus beer or wine, or both.

130 Now, on the subject of supper I'll say no more
as it's obvious to everyone that no one went without.
Because another sound, a new sound, suddenly
drew near,
which might signal the king to sample his supper,
for barely had the horns finished blowing their
breath

135 and with starters just spooned to the seated guests,
a fearful form appeared, framed in the door:
a mountain of a man, immeasurably high,
a hulk of a human from head to hips,
so long and thick in his loins and his limbs

140 I should genuinely judge him to be a half giant,
or a most massive man, the mightiest of mortals.
But handsome, too, like any horseman worth his
horse,
for despite the bulk and brawn of his body
his stomach and waist were slender and sleek.
In fact in all features he was finely formed

it seemed.
145 Amazement seized their minds,
 no soul had ever seen
 a knight of such a kind—
150 entirely emerald green.

And his gear and garments were green as well:
a tight fitting tunic, tailored to his torso,
and a cloak to cover him, the cloth fully lined
with smoothly shorn fur clearly showing, and faced
155 with all-white ermine, as was the hood,
worn shawled on his shoulders, shucked from his
 head.

On his lower limbs his leggings were also green,
wrapped closely round his calves, and his sparkling
 spurs
were green-gold, strapped with stripy silk,
and were set on his stockings, for this stranger was
160 shoeless.

In all vestments he revealed himself veritably
 verdant!
From his belt hooks and buckle to the baubles and
 gems
arrayed so richly around his costume
and adorning the saddle, stitched onto silk.

All the details of his dress are difficult to describe,
165 embroidered as it was with butterflies and birds,
green beads emblazoned on a background of gold.
All the horse's tack—harness strap, hind strap,
the eye of the bit, each alloy and enamel
and the stirrups he stood in were similarly tinted,
170 and the same with the cantle and the skirts of the
 saddle,

all glimmering and glinting with the greenest jewels.
And the horse: every hair was green, from hoof
 to mane.

175 A steed of pure green stock.
Each snort and shudder strained
the hand-stitched bridle, but
his rider had him reined.

The fellow in green was in fine fettle.
180 The hair of his head was as green as his horse,
fine flowing locks which fanned across his back,
plus a bushy green beard growing down to his
breast,
which hung with the splendid hair from his head
and was lopped in a line at elbow length
so half his arms were gownned in green growth,
185 crimped at the collar, like a king's cape.
The mane of his mount was groomed to match,
combed and knotted into curlicues
then tinselled with gold, tied and twisted
green over gold, green over gold.
190 The fetlocks were finished in the same fashion
with bright green ribbon braided with beads,
as was the tail—to its tippety-tip!
And a long, tied thong lacing it tight
where bright and burnished gold bells chimed clearly.
195 No waking man had witnessed such a warrior
or weird warhorse—otherworldly, yet flesh
and bone.

His look was lightning bright
said those who glimpsed its glow.
200 It seemed no man there might
survive his violent blow.

Yet he wore no helmet and no hauberk either,
no armored apparel or plate was apparent,
205 and he swung no sword nor sported any shield,
but held in one hand a sprig of holly—
of all the evergreens the greenest ever—

and in the other hand held the mother of all axes,
a cruel piece of kit I kid you not:
the head was an ell in length at least
210 and forged in green steel with a gilt finish;
its broad-edged blade brightly burnished,
it could shear a man's scalp and shave him to boot.
The handle which fitted that fiend's great fist
was inlaid with iron, end to end,
215 with green pigment picking out impressive designs.
From stock to neck, where it stopped with a knot,
a lace was looped the length of the haft,
trimmed with tassels and tails of string
fastened firmly in place by forest-green buttons.
220 And he kicks on, canters through that crowded hall
towards the top table, not the least bit timid,
cocksure of himself, sitting high in the saddle.
"And who," he bellows, without breaking breath,
"is governor of this gaggle? I'll be glad to know."
225 It's with him and no one else that I'll hold
a pact."

He held them with his eyes,
and looked from right to left,
not knowing, of those knights,
230 which person to respect.

The guests looked on. They gaped and they gawked
and were mute with amazement: what did it mean
that human and horse could develop this hue,
should grow to be grass-green or greener still,
235 like green enamel emboldened by bright gold?
Some stood and stared then stepped a little closer,
drawn near to the knight to know his next move;
they'd seen some sights, but this was something
special,
240 a miracle or magic, or so they imagined.

Yet several of the lords were like statues in their
seats,
left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
The hall fell hushed, as if all who were present
had slipped into sleep or some trancelike state.

245 No doubt
 not all were stunned and stilled
 by dread, but duty bound
 to hold their tongues until
 their sovereign could respond.

250 Then the king acknowledged this curious occurrence,
cordially addressed him, keeping his cool.
"A warm welcome, sir, this winter's night.
My name is Arthur, I am head of this house.
Won't you slide from that saddle and stay awhile,
255 and the business which brings you we shall learn of
 later."

 "No," said the knight, "by Him in highest heaven,
I'm not here to idle in your hall this evening.
But because your acclaim is so loudly chorused,
and your castle and brotherhood are called the best,
260 the strongest men to ever mount the saddle,
 the worthiest knights ever known to the world,
 both in competition and true combat,
 and since courtesy, so it's said, is championed here,
I'm intrigued, and attracted to your door at this time.
Be assured by this holly stem here in my hand
265 that I mean no menace. So expect no malice,
 for if I'd slogged here tonight to slay and slaughter
 my helmet and hauberk wouldn't be at home
 and my sword and spear would be here at my side,
 and more weapons of war, as I'm sure you're aware;
270 I'm clothed for peace, not kitted out for conflict.
But if you're half as honorable as I've heard folk say
you'll gracefully grant me this game which I ask for

by right.”
The King said, “What you wish,
275 most notable of knights,
we will provide you with:
a fair, unarmoured fight.”

“I’m spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,
280 the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed
bairns.

If I’d ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck
these lightweight men wouldn’t last a minute.
But it’s Yuletide—a time of youthfulness, yes?
So at Christmas in this court I lay down a challenge:
285 if a person here present, within these premises,
is big or bold or red-blooded enough
to strike me one stroke and be struck in return,
I shall give him as a gift this gigantic cleaver
and the axe shall be his to handle how he likes.
I’ll kneel, bare my neck and take the first knock.
290 So who has the gall? The gumption? The guts?
Who’ll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon?
I offer the axe—who’ll have it as his own?
I’ll afford one free hit from which I won’t flinch,
and promise that twelve months will pass in peace,
295 then claim
the duty I deserve
in one year and one day.
Does no one have the nerve
to wager in this way?”
300

If flustered at first, now totally foxed
were the household and the lords, both the highborn
and the low.

Still stirruped, the knight swiveled round in his
saddle
looking left and right, his red eyes rolling

305 beneath the bristles of his bushy green brows,
his beard swishing from side to side.
When the court kept its counsel he cleared his throat
and stiffened his spine. Then he spoke his mind:
"So here is the House of Arthur," he scoffed,
310 "whose virtues reverberate across vast realms.
Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so
famous for?
And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth
bragging?
The towering reputation of the Round Table,
skittled and scuppered by a stranger—what a
scandal!
You flap and you flinch and I've not raised a finger!"
315 Then he laughed so loud that their leader saw red.
Blood flowed to his fine-featured face and he raged
inside.
His men were also hurt—
those words had pricked their pride.
320 But born so brave at heart
the king stepped up one stride.

"Your request," he countered, "is quite insane,
and folly finds the man who flirts with the fool.
No warrior worth his salt would be worried by your
325 words,
so in heaven's good name hand over the axe
and I'll happily fulfill the favor you ask."
He strides to him swiftly and seizes his arm;
the man dismounts in one mighty leap.
Then Arthur grips the axe, grabs it by its haft
330 and takes it above him, intending to attack.
Yet the stranger before him stands up straight,
highest in the house by at least a head,
but stands there sternly, stroking his beard,
drawing down his coat, countenance undaunted,

335 about to be bludgeoned, but no more bothered
than a guest at the table being given a goblet
of wine.

By Guinevere, Gawain
now to his king inclines
340 and says, "I stake my claim.
May this melee be mine."

"Should you call me, courteous lord," said Gawain to
his king,
"to rise from my seat and stand at your side,
politely take leave of my place at the table
345 and quit without causing offence to my queen,
then I would come to your counsel before this great
court.

For I find it unfitting, as my fellow knights would,
when a deed of such daring is dangled before us
that you take on this trial—tempted as you are—
350 when brave, bold men are seated on these benches,
men never matched in the mettle of their minds,
never beaten or bettered in the field of battle.

I am weakest of your warriors and feeblest of wit;
loss of my life would be least lamented.

355 Were I not your nephew my life would mean
nothing;

to be born of your blood is my body's only claim.
Such a foolish affair is unfitting for a king,
so; being first to come forward, it should fall to me.
And if my proposal is improper, let no other person
360 stand blame."

The knighthood then unites
and each knight says the same:
their king can stand aside
and give Gawain the game.
365

So the sovereign instructed his knight to stand.

Getting to his feet he moved graciously forward
 and knelt before Arthur, taking hold of the axe.
 Letting go of it, Arthur then held up his hand
 to give young Gawain the blessing of God
 370 and hope he finds firmness in heart and fist.
 "Take care, young cousin, to catch him cleanly,
 use full-blooded force then you needn't fear
 the blow which he threatens to trade in return."
 Gawain, with the weapon, walked towards the
 375 warrior,
 and they stood face-to-face, not one man afraid.
 Then the green knight spoke, growled at Gawain:
 "Before we compete, repeat what we've promised.
 And start by saying your name to me, sir,
 and tell me the truth so I can take it on trust."
 380 "In good faith," said the knight, "Gawain is my name.
 I heave this axe, and whatever happens after,
 in twelvemonth's time I'll be struck in return
 with any weapon you wish, and by you and you
 alone."
 385 The green man speaks again:
 "I swear on all I know,
 I'm glad it's you, Gawain,
 who'll drive the axe-head home."
 390 "Gawain," said the green knight, "by God, I'm glad
 the favor I've called for will fall from your fist.
 You've perfectly repeated the promise we made
 and the terms of the contest are crystal clear.
 Except for one thing: you must solemnly swear
 that you'll seek me yourself; that you'll search me
 395 out
 to the ends of the earth to earn the same blow
 as you'll dole out today in this decorous hall."
 "But where will you be? Where's your abode?
 You're a man of mystery, as God is my maker.

400 Which court do you come from and what are you
called?

There is knowledge I need, including your name,
then I shall use all my wit to work out the way,
and keep to our contract, so cross my heart."

"But enough at New Year. It needs nothing more,"
405 said the warrior in green to worthy Gawain.

"I could tell you the truth once you've taken the
blow;

if you smite me smartly I could spell out the facts
of my house and home and my name, if it helps,
then you'll pay me a visit and vouch for our pact.
Or if I keep quiet you might cope all the better,
410 loafing and lounging here, looking no further. But
we stall!

Now grasp that gruesome axe
and show your striking style."

415 He answered, "Since you ask,"
and touched the tempered steel.

The green knight took his stance, prepared to be
struck,

bent forward, revealing a flash of green flesh
as he heaped his hair to the crown of his head,
the nape of his neck now naked and ready.

420 Gawain grips the axe and heaves it heavenwards,
plants his left foot firmly on the floor in front,
then swings it swiftly towards the bare skin.

The cleanness of the strike cleaved the spinal cord
and parted the fat and the flesh so far

425 that the bright steel blade took a bite from the floor.
The handsome head tumbles onto the earth
and the king's men kick it as it clatters past.

Blood gutters brightly against his green gown,
yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink
430 but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs

and rummages around, reaches at their feet
and cops hold of his head and hoists it high,
and strides to his steed, snatches the bridle,
435 steps into the stirrup and swings into the saddle
still gripping his head by a handful of hair.
Then he settles himself in his seat with the ease
of a man unmarked, never mind being minus
his head!

440 He wheeled his bulk about,
that body which still bled.
They cowered in the court
before his speech was said.

445 For that scalp and skull now swung from his fist;
to the noblest at the table he turned the face
and it opened its eyelids, stared straight ahead
and spoke this speech, which you'll hear for
yourselves:

"Sir Gawain, be wise enough to keep your word
and faithfully follow me until you find me,
450 as you vowed in this hall within hearing of these
horsemen.

You're charged with getting to the Green Chapel,
to reap what you've sown. You'll rightfully receive
that what is due to be dealt to you as New Year
dawns.

455 Men know my name as the Green Chapel knight,
and even a fool couldn't fail to find me.

So come, or be called a coward forever."
With a tug of the reins he twisted around
and, head still in hand, galloped out of the hall,
so the hooves brought fire from the flame in the
flint.

460 Which kingdom he came from they hadn't a clue,
no more than they knew where he made for next.
And then?

Well, with the green man gone
they laughed and grinned again.
And yet such goings-on
465 were magic to those men.

And although King Arthur was awestruck at heart
no sign of it showed. Instead he spoke
to his exquisite queen with courteous words:
"Dear lady, don't be daunted by this deed today,
470 it's in keeping that such strangeness should occur at
Christmas
between sessions of banter and seasonal song,
amid the lively pastimes of ladies and lords.
And at least I'm allowed to eat at last,
having witnessed such wonder, wouldn't you say?"
475 Then he glanced at Gawain and spoke gracefully:
"Now hang up your axe⁸—one hack is enough."
So it dangled from the drape behind the dais
so that men who saw it would be mesmerized and
amazed,
and give voice, on its evidence, to that stunning
480 event.
Then the two of them turned and walked to the
table,
the monarch and his knight, and men served the
meal—
double dishes apiece, rare delicacies,
all manner of food—and the music of minstrels.
And they danced and sang till the sun went down
485 that day.
But mind your mood, Gawain,
lest dread make you delay,
or lose this lethal game
you've promised you will play.
490

Endnotes

- Note *: The translation is by Simon Armitage. [Return to reference *](#)
- Note 1: “Fitt” is a technical term used by the *Gawain* poet, and other late medieval English alliterative poets, to designate the longer divisions of a poem. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The treacherous knight is Aeneas, who was a traitor to his city, Troy, according to medieval tradition, but Aeneas was actually tried by the Greeks for his refusal to hand his sister Polyxena over to them. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Like Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome is here given Trojan ancestry. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The reputed founder of Lombardy. Ticius is not otherwise known. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Great-grandson of Aeneas and legendary founder of Britain, not elsewhere given the name *Felix* (Latin, “happy”). [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The forfeits that made the ladies who lost laugh were in all likelihood kisses. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A raised platform. Although the Round Table is referred to (line 39), the king and queen, along with the most prominent members of the court, are seated above the rest. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A colloquial expression equivalent to “bury the hatchet,” but here with an ironic literal sense. [Return to reference 8](#)

FITT ii

This happening was a gift—just as Arthur had asked
for
and had yearned to hear of while the year was young.
And if guests had no subject as they strolled to their
seats,
now this serious concern sustained their chatter.
And Gawain had been glad to begin the game,
495 but don't be so shocked should the plot turn pear-
shaped:
for men might be merry when addled with mead
but each year, short lived, is unlike the last
and rarely resolves in the style it arrived.
So the festival finishes and a new year follows
500 in eternal sequence, season by season.
After lavish Christmas come the lean days of Lent
when the flesh is tested with fish and simple food.
Then the world's weather wages war on winter:
cold shrinks earthwards and the clouds climb;
505 sun-warmed, shimmering rain comes showering
onto meadows and fields where flowers unfurl;
woods and grounds wear a wardrobe of green;
birds burble with life and build busily
as summer spreads, settling on slopes as
510 it should.
Now every hedgerow brims
with blossom and with bud,
and lively songbirds sing
from lovely, leafy woods.
515
So summer comes in season with its subtle airs,
when the west wind sighs among shoots and seeds,
and those plants which flower and flourish are a
pleasure

as their leaves let drip their drink of dew
and they sparkle and glitter when glanced by sunlight.
520 Then autumn arrives to harden the harvest
and with it comes a warning to ripen before winter.
The drying airs arrive, driving up dust
from the face of the earth to the heights of heaven,
and wild sky wrestles the sun with its winds,
525 and the leaves of the lime lie littered on the ground,
and grass that was green turns withered and gray.
Then all which had risen over-ripens and rots
and yesterday on yesterday the year dies away,
and winter returns, as is the way of the world
530 through time.

At Michaelmas⁹ the moon
stands like that season's sign,
a warning to Gawain
to rouse himself and ride.
535

Yet he stayed until All Saints' Day¹ by his sovereign's
side,
and they feasted in the name of their noble knight
with the revels and riches of the Round Table.
The lords of that hall and their loving ladies
540 were sad and concerned for the sake of their knight,
but nevertheless they made light of his load.
Those joyless at his plight made jokes and rejoiced.
Then sorrowfully, after supper, he spoke with his
uncle,
and openly talked of the trip he must take:
"Now, lord of my life, I must ask for your leave.
545 You were witness to my wager. I have no wish
to retell you the terms—they're nothing but a trifle.
I must set out tomorrow to receive that stroke
from the knight in green, and let God be my guide."
Then the cream of Camelot crowded around:
550 Ywain and Eric and others of that ilk,

Sir Dodinal the Dreaded, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, Lionel, Lucan the Good,
and Sir Bors and Sir Bedevere—both big names,
and powerful men such as Mador de la Port.
555 This courtly committee approaches the king
to offer up heartfelt advice to our hero.
And sounds of sadness and sorrow were heard
that one as worthy and well liked as Gawain
should suffer that strike but offer no stroke in
560 reply.
Yet keeping calm the knight
just quipped, "Why should I shy
away. If fate is kind
or cruel, man still must try."
565

He remained all that day and in the morning he
dressed,
asked early for his arms and all were produced.
First a rug of rare cloth was unrolled on the floor,
heaped with gear which glimmered and gleamed,
and the stout knight steps onto it and handles the
570 steel.
He tries on his tunic of extravagant silk,
then the neatly cut cloak, closed at the neck,
its lining finished with a layer of white fur.
Then they settled his feet into steel shoes
and clad his calves, clamped them with greaves,
575 then hinged and highly polished plates
were knotted with gold thread to the knight's knees.
Then leg guards were fitted, lagging the flesh,
attached with thongs to his thick-set thighs.
Then comes the suit of shimmering steel rings
580 encasing his body and his costly clothes:
well burnished braces to both of his arms,
good elbow guards and glinting metal gloves,
all the trimmings and trappings of a knight tricked out

585 to ride:
 a metal suit that shone;
 gold spurs which gleam with pride;
 a keen sword swinging from
 the silk belt to his side.

590 Fastened in his armor he seemed fabulous, famous,
 every link looking golden to the very last loop.
 Yet for all that metal he still made it to mass,
 honored the Almighty before the high altar.
 After which he comes to the king and his consorts
595 and asks to take leave of the ladies and lords;
 they escort and kiss him and commended him to
 Christ.

 Now Gringolet is rigged out and ready to ride
 with a saddle which flickered with fine gold fringes
 and was set with new studs for the special occasion.
600 The bridle was bound with stripes of bright gold,
 the apparel of the panels was matched in appearance
 to the color of the saddlebows and cropper and cover,
 and nails of red gold were arrayed all around,
 shining splendidly like splintered sunlight.
 Then he holds up his helmet and hastily kisses it;
605 it was strongly stapled and its lining was stuffed,
 and sat high on his head, fastened behind
 with a colorful cloth to cover his neck
 embroidered and bejeweled with brilliant gems
 on the broad silk border, and with birds on the seams
610 such as painted parrots perched among periwinkles
 and turtle doves and true lover's knots, tightly
 entwined
 as if women had worked at it seven winters
 at least.

615 The diamond diadem
 was greater still. It gleamed
 with flawless, flashing gems

both clear and smoked, it seemed.

Then they showed him the shining scarlet shield
with its pentangle painted in pure gold.²
620 He seized it by its strap and slung it round his neck;
he looked well in what he wore, and was worthy of it.
And why the pentangle was appropriate to that prince
I intend to say, though it will stall our story.
625 It is a symbol that Solomon once set in place
and is taken to this day as a token of fidelity,
for the form of the figure is a five-pointed star
and each line overlaps and links with the last
so is ever eternal, and when spoken of in England
630 is known by the name of the endless knot.
So it suits this soldier in his spotless armor,
fully faithful in five ways five times over.
For Gawain was as good as the purest gold—
devoid of vices but virtuous, loyal
and kind,
635 so bore that badge on both
his shawl and shield alike.
A prince who talked the truth:
known as the noblest knight.



640 First he was deemed flawless in his five senses;
and secondly his five fingers were never at fault;
and thirdly his faith was founded in the five wounds
Christ received on the cross, as the creed recalls.
And fourthly, if that soldier struggled in skirmish
645 one thought pulled him through above all other
things:
the fortitude he found in the five joys
which Mary had conceived in her son, our Savior.³
For precisely that reason the princely rider
had the shape of her image inside his shield,
so by catching her eye his courage would not crack.
650 The fifth set of five which I heard the knight followed
included friendship and fraternity with fellow men,
purity and politeness that impressed at all times,
and pity, which surpassed all pointedness. Five things
which meant more to Gawain than to most other
655 men.
So these five sets of five were fixed in this knight,
each linked to the last through the endless line,

a five-pointed form which never failed,
never stronger to one side or slack at the other,
but unbroken in its being from beginning to end
660 however its trail is tracked and traced.
So the star on the spangling shield he sported
shone royally, in gold, on a ruby red background,
the pure pentangle as people have called it
for years.

665 Then, lance in hand, held high,
and got up in his gear
he bids them all good-bye
one final time, he fears.

670 Spiked with the spurs the steed sped away
with such force that the fire-stones sparked
underfoot.
All sighed at the sight, and with sinking hearts
they whispered their worries to one another,
concerned for their comrade. "A pity, by Christ,
if a lord so noble should lose his life.

675 To find his equal on earth would be far from easy.
Cleverer to have acted with caution and care,
deemed him a duke—a title he was due—
a leader of men, lord of many lands;
better that than being battered into oblivion,
680 beheaded by an ogre, through headstrong pride.
Whoever knew any king to take counsel of a knight
in the grip of an engrossing Christmas game?"
Warm tears welled up in their weepy eyes
as gallant Sir Gawain galloped from court
685 that day.

He sped from home and hearth
and went his winding way
on steep and snaking paths,
just as the story says.

690

Now through England's realm he rides and rides,
Sir Gawain, God's servant, on his grim quest,
passing long dark nights unloved and alone,
foraging to feed, finding little to call food,
695 with no friend but his horse through forests and hills
and only our Lord in heaven to hear him.

He wanders near to the north of Wales
with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.
He keeps to the coast, fording each course,
700 crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore
in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people
both God and good men have quite given up on.⁴

And he constantly enquires of those he encounters
if they know, or not, in this neck of the woods,
705 of a great green man or a Green Chapel.

No, they say, never. Never in their lives.
They know of neither a chap nor a chapel
so strange.

He trails through bleak terrain.
His mood and manner change
710 at every twist and turn
towards that chosen church.

In a strange region he scales steep slopes;
far from his friends he cuts a lonely figure.
Where he bridges a brook or wades through a
715 waterway

it's no surprise to find that he faces a foe
so foul or fierce he is bound to use force.
So momentous are his travels among the mountains
to tell just a tenth would be a tall order.

Here he scraps with serpents and snarling wolves,
720 here he tangles with wodwos⁵ causing trouble in the
crag,
or with bulls and bears and the odd wild boar.

Hard on his heels through the highlands come giants.
Only diligence and faith in the face of death
will keep him from becoming a corpse or carrion.
725 And the wars were one thing, but winter was worse:
clouds shed their cargo of crystallized rain
which froze as it fell to the frost-glazed earth.
Nearly slain by sleet he slept in his armor,
730 bivouacked in the blackness amongst bare rocks
where meltwater streamed from the snow-capped
summits
and high overhead hung chandeliers of ice.
So in peril and pain Sir Gawain made progress,
crisscrossing the countryside until Christmas
Eve. Then
735 at that time of tiding,
he prayed to highest heaven.
Let Mother Mary guide him
towards some house or haven.

740 That morning he moves on, skirts the mountainside,
descends a deep forest, densely overgrown,
with vaulting hills to each half of the valley
and ancient oaks in huddles of hundreds.
Hazel and hawthorn are interwoven,
745 decked and draped in damp, shaggy moss,
and bedraggled birds on bare, black branches
pipe pitifully into the piercing cold.
Under cover of the canopy he girded Gringolet
through mud and marshland, a man all alone,
750 concerned and afraid in case he should fail
in the worship of our Deity, who, on that date
was born the Virgin's son to save our souls.
He prayed with heavy heart. "Father, hear me,
and Lady Mary, our mother most mild,
755 let me happen on some house where mass might be
heard,

and matins in the morning; meekly I ask,
and here I utter my pater, ave
and creed."

760 He rides the path and prays,
dismayed by his misdeeds,
and signs Christ's cross and says,
"Be near me in my need."

765 No sooner had he signed himself three times
than he became aware, in those woods, of high walls
in a moat, on a mound, bordered by the boughs
of thick-trunked timber which trimmed the water.
The most commanding castle a knight ever kept,
positioned in a site of sweeping parkland
with a palisade of pikes pitched in the earth
in the midst of tall trees for two miles or more.
770 He stopped and stared at one side of that stronghold
as it sparkled and shone within shimmering oaks,
and with helmet in hand he offered up thanks
to Jesus and Saint Julian,⁶ both gentle and good,
who had courteously heard him and heeded his cry.
775 "A lodging at last. So allow it, my Lord."
Then he girded Gringolet with his gilded spurs,
and purely by chance chose the principal approach
to the building, which brought him to the end of the
bridge

780 with haste.
The drawbridge stood withdrawn,
the front gates were shut fast.
Such well-constructed walls
would blunt the storm wind's blast.

785 In the saddle of his steed he halts on the slope
of the delving moat with its double ditch.
Out of water of wondrous depth, the walls
then loomed overhead to a huge height,

course after course of crafted stone,
then battlements embellished in the boldest style
790 and turrets arranged around the ramparts
with lockable loopholes set into the lookouts.
The knight had not seen a more stunning structure.
Further in, his eye was drawn to a hall
attended, architecturally, by many tall towers
795 with a series of spires spiking the air
all crowned by carvings exquisitely cut.
Uncountable chimneys the color of chalk
sprutted from the roof and sparkled in the sun.
So perfect was that vision of painted pinnacles
800 clustered within the castle's enclosure
it appeared that the place was cut from paper.⁷
Then a notion occurred to that noble knight:
to seek a visit, get invited inside,
to be hosted and housed, and all the holy days
805 remain.

Responding to his call
a pleasant porter came,
a watchman on the wall,
who welcomed Sir Gawain.

810 "Good morning," said Gawain, "will you go with a
message
to the lord of this house to let me have lodging?"
"By Saint Peter," said the porter, "it'll be my pleasure,
and I'll warrant you'll be welcome for as long as you
wish."
Then he went on his way, but came back at once
815 with a group who had gathered to greet the stranger;
the drawbridge came down and they crossed the
ditch
and knelt in the frost in front of the knight
to welcome this man in a way deemed worthy.

820

Then they yielded to their guest, yanked open the
gate,
and bidding them to rise he rode across the bridge.
He was assisted from the saddle by several men
and the strongest amongst them stabled his steed.
Then knights, and the squires of knights, drew near,
to escort him, with courtesy, into the castle.
825 As he took off his helmet, many hasty hands
stretched to receive it and to serve this noble knight,
and his sword and his shield were taken aside.
Then he made himself known to nobles and knights
and proud fellows pressed forwards to confer their
830 respects.
Still heavy with armor he was led to the hall
where a fire burned bright with the fiercest flames.
Then the master of the manor emerged from his
chamber,
to greet him in the hall with all due honor,
saying, "Behave in my house as your heart pleases.
835 To whatever you want you are welcome, do what
you will."
"My thanks," Gawain exclaimed,
"May Christ reward you well."
Then firmly, like good friends,
840 arm into arm they fell.

Gawain gazed at the lord who greeted him so
gracefully,
the great one who governed that grand estate,
powerful and large, in the prime of his life,
with a bushy beard as red as a beaver's,
845 steady in his stance, solid of build,
with a fiery face and fine conversation:
and it suited him well, so it seemed to Gawain,
to keep such a castle and captain his knights.
Escorted to his quarters the lord quickly orders
850

that a servant be assigned to assist Gawain,
and many were willing to wait on his word.
They brought him to a bedroom, beautifully furnished
with fine silken fabrics finished in gold
and curious coverlets lavishly quilted
855 in bright ermine and embroidered to each border.
Curtains ran on cords through red-gold rings,
tapestries from Toulouse and Turkistan
were fixed against walls and fitted underfoot.
With humorous banter Gawain was helped out
860 of his chain-mail coat and costly clothes,
then they rushed to bring him an array of robes
of the choicest cloth. He chose, and changed,
and as soon as he stood in that stunning gown
with its flowing skirts which suited his shape
865 it almost appeared to the persons present
that spring, with its spectrum of colors, had sprung;
so alive and lean were that young man's limbs
a nobler creature Christ had never created, they
declared.

870 This knight,
 whose country was unclear,
 now seemed to them by sight
 a prince without a peer
 in fields where fierce men fight.

875 In front of a flaming fireside a chair
was pulled into place for Gawain, and padded
with covers and quilts all cleverly stitched,
then a cape was cast across the knight
of rich brown cloth with embroidered borders,
finished inside with the finest furs,
880 ermine, to be exact, and a hood which echoed it.
Resplendently dressed he settled in his seat;
as his limbs thawed, so his thoughts lightened.
Soon a table was set on sturdy trestles

885 covered entirely with a clean white cloth
and cruets of salt and silver spoons.
In a while he washed and went to his meal.
Staff came quickly and served him in style
with several soups all seasoned to taste,
890 double helpings as was fitting, and a feast of fish,
some baked in bread, some browned over flames,
some boiled or steamed, some stewed in spices
and subtle sauces which the knight savored.
Four or five times he called it a feast,
895 and the courteous company happily cheered him
along:
"On penance plates you dine⁸—
there's better board to come."
The warming, heady wine
900 then freed his mind for fun.

Now through tactful talk and tentative enquiry
polite questions are put to this prince;
he responds respectfully, and speaks of his journey
from the Court of Arthur, King of Camelot,
the royal ruler of the Round Table,
905 and he says they now sit with Gawain himself,
who has come here at Christmastime quite by chance.
Once the lord has gathered that his guest is Gawain
he likes it so well that he laughs out loud.
All the men of that manor were of the same mind,
910 being happy to appear promptly in his presence,
this person famed for prowess and purity,
whose noble skills were sung to the skies,
whose life was the stuff of legend and lore.
Then knight spoke softly to knight, saying
915 "Watch now, we'll witness his graceful ways,
hear the faultless phrasing of flawless speech;
if we listen we will learn the merits of language
since we have in our hall a man of high honor.

920 Ours is a graceful and giving God
to grant that we welcome Gawain as our guest
as we sing of His birth who was born to save us.

 We few
 shall learn a lesson here
 in tact and manners true,
925 and hopefully we'll hear
 love's tender language, too."

Once dinner was done Gawain drew to his feet
and darkness neared as day became dusk.
Chaplains went off to the castle's chapels
930 to sound the bells hard, to signal the hour
of evensong, summoning each and every soul.
The lord goes alone, then his lady arrives,
concealing herself in a private pew.
Gawain attends, too; tugged by his sleeve
935 he is steered to a seat, led by the lord
who greets Gawain by name as his guest.
No man in the world is more welcome, are his words.
For that he is thanked. And they hug there and then,
and sit as a pair through the service in prayer.
940 Then she who desired to see this stranger
came from her closet with her sisterly crew.
She was fairest amongst them—her face, her flesh,
her complexion, her quality, her bearing, her body,
more glorious than Guinevere, or so Gawain thought,
945 and in the chancel of the church they exchanged
courtesies.
She was hand in hand with a lady to her left,
someone altered by age, an ancient dame,
well respected, it seemed, by the servants at her side.
Those ladies were not the least bit alike:
950 one woman was young, one withered by years.
The body of the beauty seemed to bloom with blood,
the cheeks of the crone were wattled and slack.

One was clothed in a kerchief clustered with pearls
which shone like snow—snow on the slopes
955 of her upper breast and bright bare throat.
The other was noosed and knotted at the neck,
her chin enveloped in chalk-white veils,
her forehead fully enfolded in silk
960 with detailed designs at the edges and hems;
nothing bare, except for the black of her brows
and the eyes and nose and naked lips
which were chapped and bleared and a sorrowful
sight.
A grand old mother, a matriarch she might
be hailed.
965 Her trunk was square and squat,
her buttocks bulged and swelled.
Most men would sooner squint
at her whose hand she held.

970 Then Gawain glanced at the gracious-looking woman,
and by leave of the lord he approached those ladies
saluting the elder with a long, low bow,
holding the other for a moment in his arms,
kissing her respectfully and speaking with courtesy.
They request his acquaintance, and quickly he offers
975 to serve them unswervingly should they say the word.
They take him between them and talk as they walk
to a hearth full of heat, and hurriedly ask
for specially spiced cakes, which are speedily fetched,
and wine filled each goblet again and again.
980 Frequently the lord would leap to his feet
insisting that mirth and merriment be made:
hauling off his hood he hoisted it on a spear—
a prize, he promised, to the person providing
most comfort and cheer at Christmastime.
985 “And my fellows and friends shall help in my fight
to see that it hangs from no head but my own.”

So the laughter of that lord lights up the room,
and Gawain and the gathering are gladdened by
games

till late.

990

So late, his lordship said,
that lamps should burn with light.
Then, blissful, bound for bed,
Sir Gawain waved good night.

995

So the morning dawns when man remembers
the day our Redeemer was born to die,
and every house on earth is joyful for Lord Jesus.
Their day was no different, being a diary of delights:
banquets and buffets were beautifully cooked
and dutifully served to diners at the dais.

1000

The ancient elder sat highest at the table
with the lord, I believe, in the chair to her left;
the sweeter one and Gawain took seats in the center
and were first at the feast to dine; then food
was carried around as custom decrees
and served to each man as his status deserved.

1005

There was feasting, there was fun, and such feelings
of joy
as could not be conveyed by quick description,
yet to tell it in detail would take too much time.

1010

But I'm aware that Gawain and the beautiful woman
found such comfort and closeness in each other's
company

through warm exchanges of whispered words
and refined conversation free from foulness
that their pleasure surpassed all princely sports

by far.

1015

Beneath the din of drums
men followed their affairs,
and trumpets thrilled and thrummed
as those two tended theirs.

1020 They drank and danced all day and the next
and danced and drank the day after that,
then Saint John's Day⁹ passed with a gentler joy
as the Christmas feasting came to a close.
Guests were to go in the grayness of dawn,
1025 so they laughed and dined as the dusk darkened,
swaying and swirling to music and song.
Then at last, in the lateness, they upped and left
toward distant parts along different paths.
Gawain offered his good-byes, but was ushered by his
host
to his host's own chamber and the heat of its
1030 chimney,
waylaid by the lord so the lord might thank him
profoundly and profusely for the favor he had shown
in honoring his house at that hallowed season
and lighting every corner of the castle with his
character.
1035 "For as long as I live my life shall be better
that Gawain was my guest at God's own feast."
"By God," said Gawain, "but the gratitude goes to you.
May the High King of Heaven repay your honor.
Your requests are now this knight's commands.
I am bound by your bidding, no boon is too high
1040 to say."
At length his lordship tried
to get his guest to stay.
But proud Gawain replied
he must now make his way.
1045
Then the lord of the castle inquired courteously
of what desperate deed in the depth of winter
should coax him from Camelot, so quickly and alone,
before Christmas was over in his king's court.
1050 "What you ask," said the knight, "you shall now know.

A most pressing matter prized me from that place:
 I myself am summoned to seek out a site
 and I have not the faintest idea where to find it.
 But find it I must by the first of the year, and not fail
 for all the acres in England, so the Lord help me.
 1055 Consequently this inquiry I come to ask of you:
 that you tell me, in truth, if you have heard the tale
 of a green chapel and the ground where it stands,
 or the guardian of those grounds who is colored
 green.
 For I am bound by a bond agreed by us both
 1060 to link up with him there, should I live that long.
 As dawn on New Year's Day draws near,
 if God sees fit, I shall face that freak
 more happily than I would the most wondrous wealth!
 With your blessing, therefore, I must follow my feet.
 1065 In three short days my destiny is due,
 and I would rather drop dead than default from duty."
 Then laughing the lord of the house said, "Stay
 longer.
 I'll direct you to your rendezvous when the time is
 right,
 you'll get to the green chapel, so give up your
 1070 grieving.
 You can bask in your bed, bide your time,
 save your fond farewells till the first of the year
 and still meet him by midmorning to do as you might.
 So stay.
 A guide will get you there
 1075 at dawn on New Year's Day.
 The place you need is near,
 two miles at most away."
 Then Gawain was giddy with gladness, and declared,
 1080 "For this more than anything I thank you thoroughly,
 and shall work to do well at whatever you wish,

until that time, attending every task."

The lord squeezed Gawain's arm and seated him at
his side,

and called for the ladies to keep them company.

1085 There was pleasure aplenty in their private talk,
the lord delighting in such lively language,
like man who might well be losing his mind.

Then speaking to Gawain, he suddenly shouted:

"You have sworn to serve me, whatever I instruct.

Will you hold to that oath right here and now?"

1090 "You may trust my tongue," said Gawain, in truth,
"for within these walls I am servant to your will."

The lord said warmly, "You were weary and worn,
hollow with hunger, harrowed by tiredness,
yet joined in my reveling right royally every night.

1095 You relax as you like, lie in your bed
until mass tomorrow, then go to your meal
where my wife will be waiting; she will sit at your side
to accompany and comfort you in my absence from
court.

So lounge:

1100 at dawn I'll rise and ride
to hunt with horse and hound."
The gracious knight agreed
and, bending low, he bowed.

1105 "Furthermore," said the master, "let's make a pact.
Here's a wager: what I win in the woods will be yours,
and what you gain while I'm gone you will give to me.

Young sir, let's swap, and strike a bond,
let a bargain be a bargain, for better or worse."

1110 "By God," said Gawain, "I agree to the terms,
and I find it pleasing that you favor such fun."

"Let drink be served and we'll seal the deal,"
the lord cried loudly, and everyone laughed.
So they reveled and caroused uproariously,

1115 those lords and ladies, for as long as they liked;
then with immaculate exchanges of manners and
remarks
they slowed and they stood and they spoke softly.
And with parting kisses the party dispersed,
footmen going forward with flaring torches,
1120 and everybody was brought to their bed at long last,
to dream.
Before they part the pair
repeat their pact again.
That lord was well aware
of how to host a game.
1125

Endnotes

- Note 9: September 29. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: November 1. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A five-pointed star, formed by five lines drawn without lifting the pencil from the paper; as Solomon's sign (line 625), a mystical significance was attributed to it (see. p. 428). [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Gawain travels from Camelot north to the northern coast of Wales, opposite the islands of Anglesey, where he turns east across the Dee to the forest of Wirral in Cheshire. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Wild men of the woods. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Patron saint of hospitality. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Paper castles were a common table decoration at feasts. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Penance" because, although sumptuous, the meal consists of fish dishes appropriate to a fasting day. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: December 27. [Return to reference 9](#)

FITT iii

Well before sunrise the servants were stirring;
the guests who were going had called for their
grooms,
and they scurried to the stables to strap on the
saddles,
trussing and tying all the trammel and tack.
The high-ranking nobles got ready to ride,
1130 jumped stylishly to their saddles and seized the reins,
then cantered away on their chosen courses.
The lord of that land was by no means last
to be rigged out for riding with the rest of his men.
After mass he wolfed down a meal, then made
1135 for the hills in a hurry with his hunting horn.
So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on
horseback,
and the canny kennel men had coupled the hounds
and opened the cages and called them out.
1140 On the bugles they blew three long, bare notes
to a din of baying and barking, and any dogs
which wandered at will were whipped back into line
by a hundred hunters, or so I heard tell,
at least.
1145 The handlers hold their hounds,
the huntsmen's hounds run free.
Each bugle blast rebounds
between the trunks of trees.

1150 As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.
The deer in the dale, quivering with dread
hurtled to high ground, but were headed off
by the ring of beaters who bellowed boisterously.
The stags of the herd with their high-branched heads

1155 and the broad-horned bucks were allowed to pass by,
for the lord of the land had laid down a law
that man should not maim the male in close season.
But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops
and the din drove the does to sprint for the dells.
1160 Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows:
all across the forest they flashed and flickered,
biting through hides with their broad heads.
What! They bleat as they bleed and they die on the
banks,
and always the hounds are hard on their heels,
and the hunters on horseback come hammering
1165 behind
with stone-splitting cries, as if cliffs had collapsed.
And those animals which escaped the aim of the
archers
were steered from the slopes down to rivers and
streams
and set upon and seized at the stations below.
So perfect and practiced were the men at their posts
1170 and so great were the greyhounds which grappled
with the deer
that prey was pounced on and dispatched with speed
and force.
The lord's heart leaps with life.
Now on, now off his horse
1175 all day he hacks and drives.
And dusk comes in due course.

So through a lime-leaf border the lord led the hunt,
while good Gawain lay slumbering in his sheets,
dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,
1180 under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.
And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,
the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.
From below the bedding he brings up his head

1185 and lifts the corner of the curtain a little
wondering warily what it might be.
It was she, the lady, looking her loveliest,
most quietly and craftily closing the door,
nearing the bed. The knight felt nervous;
lying back he assumed the shape of sleep
1190 as she stole towards him with silent steps,
then cast up the curtain and crept inside,
then sat down softly at the side of his bed.
And awaited his waking for a good long while.
Gawain lay still, in his state of false sleep,
1195 turning over in his mind what this matter might mean,
and where the lady's unlikely visit might lead.
Yet he said to himself, "Instead of this stealth
I should openly ask what her actions imply."
So he stirred and stretched, turned on his side,
1200



The Temptation of Sir Gawain by Bertilak's Wife. Gawain may think he is protected, but bedrooms are dangerous places.

lifted his eyelids and, looking alarmed,
crossed himself hurriedly with his hand, as if saving
his life.

Her chin is pale, her cheeks
are ruddy red with health;
1205 her smile is sweet, she speaks
with lips that love to laugh:

"Good morning, Sir Gawain," said the graceful lady,
"You sleep so soundly one might sidle in here.
You're tricked and trapped! But let's make a truce,
1210 or I'll bind you in your bed, and you'd better believe
me."

The lady laughed, making light of his quandary.
"Good morning, madam," Gawain said merrily.
"I'll contentedly attend whatever task you set,
and in serving your desires I shall seek your mercy,
1215 which seems my best plan, in the circumstances!"
And he loaded his light-hearted words with laughter.
"But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave,
will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise,
then I'll quit these covers and pull on my clothes,
1220 and our words will flow more freely back and forth."
"Not so, beautiful sir," the sweet lady said.

"Bide in your bed—my own plan is better.
I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner,
then playfully parley with the man I have pinned.
1225 Because I know your name—the knight Sir Gawain,
famed through all realms whichever road he rides,
whose princely honor is highly praised
amongst lords and ladies and everyone alive.
And right here you lie. And we are left all alone,

1230 with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills
and the servants snoring and my maids asleep
and the door to this bedroom barred with a bolt.
I have in my house an honored guest
1235 so I'll make the most of my time and stay talking
a while.

You're free to have my all,
do with me what you will.
I'll come just as you call
and swear to serve you well."

1240 "In good faith," said Gawain, "such gracious flattery,
though I am not him of whom you speak.
I don't dare to receive the respect you describe
and in no way warrant such worthy words.
By God, I would be glad, if you agreed it fitting,
1245 to devote myself through speech or deed
to the prize of your praise—my joy in it would be
pure."

Said the gracious lady, "Sir Gawain, in good faith,
how improper on my part if I were to imply
any slur or slight on your status as a knight.
1250 But what lady in this land wouldn't latch the door,
wouldn't rather hold you as I do here—
in the company of your clever conversation,
forgetting all grief and engaging in joy—
than hang on to half the gold that she owns?
1255 I praise the Lord who upholds the high heavens,
for I have what I hoped for above all else by
His grace."

That lovely-looking maid,
she charmed him and she chased.
1260 But every move she made
he countered, case by case.

"Madam," said our man, "may Mary reward you,

in good faith, I have found your fairness noble.
Some fellows are praised for the feats they perform;
1265 I hardly deserve to receive such respect.
It is you who is genuinely joyful and generous."
"By Mary," she declared, "it's quite the contrary.
Were I the wealthiest woman in the world
with priceless pearls in the palm of my hand
1270 to bargain with and buy the best of all men,
then for all the signs you have shown me, sir,
of kindness, courtesy and exquisite looks—
a picture of perfection now proved to be true—
no person on this planet would be picked before you."
1275 "In fairness," said Gawain, "you found far better.
But I'm proud of the price you would pay from your
purse,
and will swear to serve you as my sovereign lady.
Let Gawain be your servant and Christ your Savior."
Then they muse on many things through morning and
1280 midday,
and the lady stares with a loving look,
but Gawain acts graciously and remains on guard,
and although no woman could be warmer or more
winning,
he is cool in his conduct, on account of the scene he
foresees:
1285 the strike he must receive,
as cruel fate decrees.
The lady begs her leave—
at once Gawain agrees.

1290 She glanced at him, laughed and gave her good-bye,
then stood, and stunned him with astounding words:
"May the Lord repay you for your prize performance.
But I know that Gawain could never be your name."
"But why not?" the knight asked nervously,
afraid that some fault in his manners had failed him.
1295

The beautiful woman blessed him, then rebuked him:
 "A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,
 the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his
 being,
 could never have lingered so long with a lady
 without craving a kiss, as politeness requires,
 or coaxing a kiss with his closing words."
 1300 "Very well," said Gawain, "Let it be as you wish.
 I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight,
 and further, should it please you, so press me no
 more."
 The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms,
 1305 leans nearer and nearer, then kisses the knight.
 Then they courteously commend one another to
 Christ,
 and without one more word the woman is away.
 Rapidly he rises and makes himself ready,
 calls for his chamberlain, chooses his clothes,
 1310 makes himself ready, then marches off to mass.
 Then he went to a meal which was made and waiting,
 and was merry and amused till the moon had silvered
 the view.
 No man felt more at home
 1315 tucked in between those two,
 the cute one and the crone.
 Their gladness grew and grew.

 And the lord of the land still led the hunt,
 driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,
 1320 and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so
 many
 of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.
 Then finally the folk came flocking to one spot
 and quickly they collected and counted the kill.
 Then the leading lords and their loyal men
 1325 chose the finest deer—those fullest with fat—

and ordered them cut open by those skilled in the art.
They assessed and sized every slain creature
and even on the feeblest found two fingers worth of
fat.

1330 Through the sliced-open throat they seized the
stomach
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.
Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt
and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,
but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.
1335 Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut
the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts.
Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp
knives
and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.
Then the beasts were prized apart at the breast,
and they went to work on the gralloching again,
1340 riving open the front as far as the hind fork,
fetching out the offal, then with further purpose
filleting the ribs in the recognized fashion.
And the spine was subject to a similar process,
being pared to the haunch so it held as one piece
1345 then hoisting it high and hacking it off.
And its name is the numbles, as far as I know, and
just that.
Its hind legs pulled apart
they slit the fleshy flaps,
1350 then cleave and quickly start
to break it down its back.

Then the heads and necks of hinds were hewn off,
and the choice meat of the flanks chopped away from
the chine,
and a fee for the crows was cast into the copse.
1355 Then each side was skewered, stabbed through the
ribs

and heaved up high, hung by its hocks,
and every person was paid with appropriate portions.
Using pelts for plates, the dogs pugged out
on liver and lights and stomach linings
1360 and a blended sop of blood and bread.
The kill horn was blown and the bloodhounds bayed.
Then hauling their meat they headed for home,
sounding howling wails on their hunting horns,
and as daylight died they had covered the distance
1365 and had come to the castle where the knight was
 ensconced,
 adjourned
 in peace, with fires aflame.
The huntsman has returned,
and when he greets Gawain
1370 warm feelings are confirmed.

Then the whole of the household was ordered to the
 hall,
and the women as well with their maids in waiting.
And once assembled he instructs the servants
that the venison be revealed in full view,
1375 and in excellent humor he asked that Gawain
should see for himself the size of the kill,
and showed him the side slabs sliced from the ribs.
"Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your
 praise?
Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?"
1380 "Yes indeed," said the other. "It's the hugest haul
I have seen this seven years in the winter season."
"And I give it all to you, Gawain," said the master,
"for according to our contract it is yours to claim."
"Just so," said Gawain, "and I'll say the same,
1385 for whatever I've won within these walls
such gains will be graciously given to you."
So he held out his arms and hugged the lord

and kissed him in the comeliest way he could.
 1390 "You're welcome to my winnings—to my one profit,
 though I'd gladly have given you any greater prize."
 "I'm grateful," said the lord, "and Gawain, this gift
 would carry more worth if you cared to confess
 by what wit you won it. And when. And where."
 1395 "That wasn't our pact," he replied. "So don't pry.
 You'll be given nothing greater, the agreement we
 have
 holds good!"
 They laugh aloud and trade
 wise words which match their mood.
 1400 When supper's meal is made
 they dine on dainty food.

 Later, they lounged by the lord's fire,
 and were served unstintingly with subtle wines
 and agreed to the game again next morning
 and to play by the rules already in place:
 1405 any takings to be traded between the two men
 at night when they met, no matter what the
 merchandise.
 They concurred on this contract in front of the court,
 and drank on the deal, and went on drinking
 till late, when they took their leave at last,
 1410 and every person present departed to bed.
 By the third cackle of the crowing cock
 the lord and his liegemen are leaping from their beds,
 so that mass and the morning meal are taken,
 and riders are rigged out ready to run as
 1415 day dawns.
 They leave the levels, loud
 with howling hunting horns.
 The huntsmen loose the hounds
 1420 through thickets and through thorns.

Soon they picked up a scent at the side of a swamp,
 and the hounds which first found it were urged ahead
 by wild words and shrill shouting.
 The pack responded with vigor and pace,
 alert to the trail, forty lurchers at least.
 1425 Then such a raucous din rose up all around them
 it ricocheted and rang through the rocky slopes.
 The hounds were mushed with hollers and the horn,
 then suddenly they swerved and swarmed together
 in a wood, between a pool and a precipice.
 1430 On a mound, near a cliff, on the margins of a marsh
 where toppled stones lay scattered and strewn,
 they coursed towards their quarry with huntsmen at
 heel.
 Then a crew of them ringed the hillock and the cliff,
 until they were certain that inside their circle
 1435 was the beast whose being three bloodhounds had
 sensed.
 Then they riled the creature with their rowdy ruckus,
 and suddenly he breaks the barrier of beaters,
 —the biggest of wild boars has bolted from his cover
 —
 1440 ancient in years and estranged from the herd,
 savage and strong, a most massive swine,
 truly grim when he grunted. And the group were
 aggrieved,
 for three were thrown down by the first of his thrusts;
 then he fled away fast without further damage.
 The other huntsmen bawled “hi” and “hay, hay,”
 1445 blasted on their bugles, blew to regroup,
 so the dogs and the men made a merry din,
 tracking him nosily, testing him time and time
 again.
 1450 The boar would stand at bay
 and aim to maul and maim

the thronging dogs, and they
would yelp and yowl in pain.

Then the archers advanced with their bows and took
aim,
1455 shooting arrows at him which were often on target,
but their points could not pierce his impenetrable
shoulders

and bounced away from his bristly brow.
The smooth, slender shafts splintered into pieces,
and the heads glanced away from wherever they hit.
1460 Battered and baited by such bombardment,
in frenzied fury he flies at the men,
hurts them horribly as he hurtles past
so that many grew timid and retreated a tad.
But the master of the manor gave chase on his
mount,

1465 the boldest of beast hunters, his bugle blaring,
trumpeting the tally-ho and tearing through thickets
till the setting sun slipped from the western sky.
So the day was spent in pursuits of this style,
while our lovable young lord had not left his bed,
and, cosseted in costly quilted covers, there he
1470 remained.

The lady, at first light,
did not neglect Gawain,
but went to wake the knight
and meant to change his mind.
1475

She approaches the curtains, parts them and peeps
in,
at which Sir Gawain makes her welcome at once,
and with prompt speech she replies to the prince,
settling by his side and laughing sweetly,
looking at him lovingly before launching her words.
1480 "Sir, if you truly are Gawain it seems wondrous to me

that a man so dedicated to doing his duty
 cannot heed the first rule of honorable behavior,
 which has entered through one ear and exited the
 other;
 1485 you have already lost what yesterday you learned
 in the truest lesson my tongue could teach."
 "What lesson?" asked the knight. "I know of none,
 though if discourtesy has occurred then blame me, of
 course."
 "I encouraged you to kiss," the lady said kindly,
 1490 "and to claim one quickly when one is required,
 an act which ennobles any knight worth the name."
 "Dear lady," said the other, "don't think such a thing,
 I dare not kiss in case I am turned down.
 If refused, I'd be at fault for offering in the first
 place."
 1495 "In truth," she told him, "you cannot be turned down.
 If someone were so snooty as to snub your advance,
 a man like you has the means of his muscles."
 "Yes, by God," said Gawain, "what you say holds
 good.
 But such heavy-handedness is frowned on in my
 homeland,
 and so is any gift not given with grace.
 1500 What kiss you command I will courteously supply,
 have what you want or hold off, whichever
 the case."
 So bending from above
 the fair one kissed his face.
 1505 The two then talk of love:
 its grief; also its grace.
 "I would like to learn," said the noble lady,
 "and please find no offence, but how can it follow
 that a lord so lively and young in years,
 1510 a champion in chivalry across the country—

and in chivalry, the chiefmost aspect to choose,
 as all knights acknowledge, is loyalty in love,
 for when tales of truthful knights are told
 in both title and text the topic they describe
 1515 is how lords have laid down their lives for love,
 endured for many days love's dreadful ordeal,
 then vented their feelings with avenging valor
 by bringing great bliss to a lady's bedroom—
 and you the most notable knight who is known,
 1520 whose fame goes before him . . . yes, how can it
 follow
 that twice I have taken this seat at your side
 yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable
 which belongs to love or anything like it.
 A knight so courteous and considerate in his service
 1525 really ought to be eager to offer this pupil
 some lessons in love, and to lead by example.
 Why, are you, whom all men honor, actually ignorant,
 or do you deem me too dull to hear of dalliances?
 I come
 1530 to learn of love and more,
 a lady all alone.
 Perform for me before
 my husband heads for home."
 "In faith," said Gawain, "may God grant you fortune.
 1535 It gives me great gladness and seems a good game
 that a woman so worthy should want to come here
 and take pains to play with your poor knight,
 unfit for her favors—I am flattered indeed.
 But to take on the task of explaining true love
 1540 or touch on the topics those love tales tell of,
 with yourself, who I sense has more insight and skill
 in the art than I have, or even a hundred
 of the likes of me, on earth where I live,
 would be somewhat presumptuous, I have to say.
 1545

But to the best of my ability I'll do your bidding,
bound as I am to honor you forever
and to serve you, so let our Savior preserve me!"
So the lady tempted and teased him, trying
to entice him to wherever her intentions might lie.
1550 But fairly and without fault he defended himself,
no sin on either side transpiring, only happiness
that day.

At length, when they had laughed,
the woman kissed Gawain.
1555 Politely then she left
and went her own sweet way.

Roused and risen he was ready for mass,
and then men sumptuously served the morning meal.
Then he loitered with the ladies the length of the day
1560 while the lord of the land ranged left and right
in pursuit of that pig which stampeded through the
uplands,
breaking his best hounds with its back-snapping bite
when it stood embattled . . . then bowmen would
strike,
goaded it to gallop into open ground
1565 where the air was alive with the huntsman's arrows.
That boar made the best men flinch and bolt,
till at last his legs were like lead beneath him,
and he hobbled away to hunker in a hole
by a stony rise at the side of a stream.
1570 With the bank at his back he scrapes and burrows,
frothing and foaming foully at the mouth,
whetting his white tusks. The hunters waited,
irked by the effort of aiming from afar
but daunted by the danger of daring to venture
1575 too near.

So many men before
had fallen prey. They feared

that fierce and frenzied boar
whose tusks could slash and tear.

1580 Till his lordship hacks up, urging on his horse,
spots the swine at standstill encircled by men,
then handsomely dismounts and unhands his horse,
brandishes a bright sword and goes bounding
onwards,
wades through the water to where the beast waits.

1585 Aware that the man was wafting a weapon
the hog's hairs stood on end, and its howling grunt
made the fellows there fear for their master's fate.
Then the boar burst forward, bounded at the lord,
so that beast and hunter both went bundling

1590 into white water, and the swine came off worst,
because the moment they clashed the man found his
mark,
knifing the boar's neck, nailing his prey,
hammering it to the hilt, bursting the hog's heart.
Screaming, it was swept downstream, almost slipping

1595 beneath.
At least a hundred hounds
latch on with tearing teeth.
Then, dragged to drier ground,
the dogs complete its death.

1600 The kill was blown on many blaring bugle
and the unhurt hunters hollered and whooped.
The chief amongst them, in charge of the chase,
commanded the bloodhounds to bay at the boar,
then one who was wise in woodland ways

1605 began carefully to cut and carve up the carcass.
First he hacks off its head and hoists it aloft,
then roughly rives it right along the spine;
he gouges out the guts and grills them over coals,

1610

and blended with bread they are tidbits for the
bloodhounds.

Next he fetches out the fillets of glimmering flesh
and retrieves the intestines in time-honored style,
then the two sides are stitched together intact
and proudly displayed on a strong pole.

1615 So with the swine swinging they swagger home,
the head of the boar being borne before the lord
who had fought so fiercely in the ford till the beast
was slain.

1620 The day then dragged, it seemed,
before he found Gawain,
who comes when called, most keen
to countenance the claim.

Now the lord is loud with words and laughter
and speaks excitedly when he sees Sir Gawain;
1625 he calls for the ladies and the company of the court
and he shows off the meat slabs and shares the story
of the boar's hulking hugeness, and the full horror
of the fight to the finish as it fled through the forest.
And Gawain is quick to compliment the conquest,
praising it as proof of the lord's prowess,
1630 for such prime pieces of perfect pork
and such sides of swine were a sight to be seen.
Then admiringly he handles the boar's huge head,
feigning fear to flatter the master's feelings.
"Now Gawain," said the lord, "I give you this game,
1635 as our wager warranted, as well you remember."
"Certainly," said Sir Gawain. "It shall be so.
And graciously I shall give you my gains in exchange."
He catches him by the neck and courteously kisses
him,
1640 then a second time kisses him in a similar style.
"Now we're even," said Gawain, "at this eventide;

the clauses of our contract have been kept and you
have what

I owe."

1645 "By Saint Giles," the just lord says,
"You're now the best I know.
By wagering this way
your gains will grow and grow."

1650 Then the trestle tables were swiftly assembled
and cast with fine cloths. A clear, living light
from the waxen torches awakened the walls.
Places were set and supper was served,
and a din arose as they reveled in a ring
around the fire on the floor, and the feasting party
made much pleasant music at the meal and after,
1655 singing seasonal songs and carol dancing
with as much amusement as a mouth could mention.
The young woman and Gawain sat together all the
while.

1660 And so loving was that lady towards the young lord,
with stolen glances and secret smiles
that the man himself was maddened and amazed,
but his breeding forbade him rebuking a lady,
and though tongues might wag he returned her
attention

all night.

1665 Before his friends retire
his lordship leads the knight,
heads for his hearth and fire
to linger by its light.

1670 They supped and swapped stories, and spoke again
of the night to come next, which was New Year's Eve.
Gawain pleaded politely to depart by morning,
so in two days' time he might honor his treaty.
But the lord was unswerving, insisting that he stayed:

“As an honest soul I swear on my heart,
you shall find the Green Chapel to finish your affairs
long before dawn on New Year’s Day.
1675 So lie in your room and laze at your leisure
while I ride my estate, and, as our terms dictate,
we’ll trade our trophies when the hunt returns.
I have tested you twice and found you truthful.
But think tomorrow *third time throw best*.
1680 Now, a lord can feel low whenever he likes,
so let’s chase cheerfulness while we have the chance.”
So those gentlemen agreed that Gawain would stay,
and they took more drink, then by torchlight retired to
their beds.
1685 Our man then sleeps, a most
reposed and peaceful rest.
As hunters must, his host
is up at dawn and dressed.

1690 After mass the master grabs a meal with his men
and asks for his mount on that marvelous morning.
All those grooms engaged to go with their lord
were high on their horses before the hall gates.
The fields were dazzling, fixed with frost,
and the crown of sunrise rose scarlet and crimson,
1695 scalding and scattering cloud from the sky.
At the fringe of the forest the dogs were set free
and the rumpus of the horns went ringing through the
rocks.
They fall on the scent of a fox, and follow,
turning and twisting as they sniff out the trail.
1700 A young harrier yowls and a huntsman yells,
then the pack come panting to pick up the scent,
running as a rabble along the right track.
The fox scurries ahead, they scamper behind,
and pursue him at speed when he comes within sight,
1705 haranguing him with horrific ranting howls.

Now and then he doubles back through thorny
thickets,
or halts and harkens in the hem of a hedge,
until finally, by a hollow, he hurdles a fence,
and carefully he creeps by the edge of a copse,
1710 convinced that his cunning has conned those canines!
But unawares he wanders where they lie in wait,
where greyhounds are gathered together, a group
of three.

1715 He springs back with a start,
then twists and turns and flees.
With heavy, heaving heart
he tracks towards the trees.

It was one of life's delights to listen to those hounds
as they massed to meet him, marauding together.
1720 They bayed bloodily at the sight of his being,
as if clustering cliffs had crashed to the ground.
Here he was ambushed by bushwhacking huntsmen
waiting with a welcome of wounding words;
there he was threatened and branded a thief,
1725 and the team on his tail gave him no time to tarry.
Often, in the open, the pack tried to pounce,
then that crafty Reynard¹ would creep into cover.
So his lordship and his lords were merrily led
in this manner through the mountains until
1730 midafternoon,
while our handsome hero snoozed contentedly at
home,
kept from the cold of the morning by curtains.
But love would not let her ladyship sleep
nor suppress the purpose which suppressed her
heart.
1735 She rose from her rest and rushed to his room
in a flowing robe that reached to the floor
and was finished inside with fine-trimmed furs.

Her head went unhooded, but heavenly gems
were entwined in her tresses in clusters of twenty.
1740 She wore nothing on her face; her neck was naked,
and her shoulders were bare to both back and breast.
She comes into his quarters and closes the door,
throws the window wide open and wakes Gawain,
right away rouses him with ringing words for
his ear.

1745 "Oh, sir, how can you sleep
when morning comes so clear?"
And though his dreams are deep
he cannot help but hear.

1750 Yes he dozes in a daze, dreams and mutters
like a mournful man with his mind on dark matters—
how destiny might deal him a death blow on the day
when he grapples with the guardian of the Green
Chapel;
of how the strike of the axe must be suffered without
struggle.

1755 But sensing her presence there he surfaces from
sleep,
comes quickly from the depths of his dreams to
address her.

Laughing warmly she walks towards him
and finds his face with the friendliest kiss.
In a worthy style he welcomes the woman
and seeing her so lovely and alluringly dressed,
1760 every feature so faultless, her complexion so fine,
a passionate heat takes hold in his heart.
They traded smiles and speech tripped from their
tongues,
and a bond of friendship was forged there, all blissful
and bright.

1765 They talk with tenderness
and pride, and yet their plight

is perilous unless
sweet Mary minds her knight.

1770 For that noble princess pushed him and pressed him,
nudged him ever nearer to a limit where he needed
to allow her love or impolitely reject it.

He was careful to be courteous and avoid
uncouthness,
and more so for the sake of his soul should he sin
and be counted a betrayer by the keeper of the
1775 castle.

"I shall not succumb," he swore to himself.
With affectionate laughter he fenced and deflected
all the loving phrases which leapt from her lips.
"You shall bear the blame," said the beautiful one,
1780 "if you feel no love for the lady you lie with,
and wound her, more than anyone on earth, to the
heart.

Unless, of course, there is a lady in your life
to whom you are tied and so tightly attached
that the bond will not break, as I must now believe.
So in honesty and trust now tell me the truth;
1785 for all the love alive, do not lessen the truth
with guile."

"You judge wrong, by Saint John,"
he said to her, and smiled.

"There is no other one
1790 nor will be for this while!"

"Those words," said the woman, "are the worst of all.
But I asked, and you answered, and now I ache.
Kiss me as I wish and I shall walk away
in mourning like a lady who loved too much."
1795 Stooping and sighing she kisses him sweetly,
then withdraws from his side, saying as she stands,

"But before we part will you find me some small
 favor?
 Give me some gift—a glove at least,
 that might leaven my loss when we meet in my
 1800 memory."
 "Well it were," said Gawain. "I wish I had here
 my most precious possession as a present for your
 love,
 for over and over you deserve and are owed
 the highest prize I could hope to offer.
 But I would not wish on you a worthless token,
 1805 and it strikes me as unseemly that you should receive
 nothing greater than a glove as a keepsake from
 Gawain.
 I am here on an errand in an unknown land
 without men bearing bags of beautiful things,
 which my regard for you, lady, makes me regret;
 1810 but man must live by his means, and neither mope
 nor moan."
 The pretty one replies:
 "Nay, knight, since you decline
 to pass to me a prize,
 1815 you must have one of mine."

 She offers him a ring of rich, red gold,
 and the stunning stone set upon it stood proud,
 beaming and burning with the brightness of the sun;
 what wealth it was worth you can well imagine.
 1820 But he would not accept it, and said straight away,
 "By God, no tokens will I take at this time;
 I have nothing to give, so nothing will I gain."
 She insists he receive it but still he resists,
 and swears, on his name as a knight, not to swerve.
 1825 Snubbed by his decision, she said to him then,
 "You refuse my ring because you find it too fine,
 and don't care to be deeply indebted to me;

so I give you my girdle, a lesser thing to gain.”
1830 From around her body she unbuckled the belt
which fastened the frock beneath her fair mantle,
a green silk girdle trimmed with gold,
exquisitely edged and hemmed by hand.
And she sweetly beseeched Sir Gawain to receive it,
in spite of its slightness, and hoped he would accept.
1835 But still he maintained he intended to take
neither gold nor girdle, until by God’s grace
the challenge he had chosen was finally achieved.
“With apologies I pray you be not displeased,
but end all your offers, for always against them
1840 I am.
For all your grace I owe
a thousand thank-you’s, ma’am.
I shall through sun and snow
remain your loyal man.”
1845
“And now he spurns my silk,” the lady responded,
“so simple in itself, or so it appears,
so little and unlikely, worth nothing, or less.
But the knight who knew of the power knitted in it
would pay a high price to possess it, perhaps.
1850 For the body which is bound within this green belt,
as long as it is buckled robustly about him,
will be safe against anyone who seeks to strike him,
and all the slyness on earth wouldn’t see him slain.”
The man mulled it over, and it entered his mind
1855 it might just be the jewel for the jeopardy he faced
and save him from the strike in his challenge at the
chapel.
With luck, it might let him escape with his life.
So relenting at last he let her speak,
and promptly she pressed him to take the present,
1860 and he granted her wish, and she gave with good
grace,

though went on to beg him not to whisper a word
of this gift to her husband, and Gawain agreed;
those words of theirs within those walls
should stay.

1865 His thanks are heartfelt, then.
No sooner can he say
how much it matters, when
the third kiss comes his way.

1870 Then the lady departed, leaving him alone,
for no more merriment could be had from that man.
And once she has quit he clothes himself quickly,
rises and dresses in the richest of robes,
stowing the love-lace safely aside,
hiding it away from all hands and eyes.

1875 Then he went at once to the chapel of worship,
privately approached the priest and implored him
to allow his confession, and to lead him in life
so his soul might be saved when he goes to his grave.

1880 Then fully and frankly he spoke of his sins,
no matter how small, always seeking mercy,
beseeching the counselor that he receive absolution.
The priest declares him so clean and so pure
that the Day of Doom could dawn in the morning.

1885 Then in merrier mood he mingled with the ladies,
caroling and carousing and carrying on
as never before, until nightfall. Folk feel
and hear

and see his boundless bliss
and say, "Such charm and cheer;
1890 he's at his happiest
since his arrival here."

And long let him loiter there, looked after by love.
Now the lord of the land was still leading his men,
finishing off the fox he had followed for so long.
1895

He vaults a fence to flush out the victim,
hearing that the hounds are harrying hard.
Then Reynard scoots from a section of scrub
and the rabble of the pack rush right at his heels.
Aware of its presence the wary lord waits,
1900 then bares his bright sword and swishes at the beast,
which shirks from its sharpness, and would have shot
away
but a hound flew forward before it could flee
and under the hooves of the horses they have him,
worrying the wily one with wrathful baying.
1905 The lord hurtles from his horse and heaves the fox
up,
wrestles it from the reach of those ravenous mouths,
holds it high over head and hurrahs manfully
while the bloodthirsty bloodhounds bay and howl.
And the other huntsmen hurried with their horns
1910 to catch sight of the slaughter and celebrate the kill.
And when the courtly company had come together
the buglers blew with one mighty blast,
and the others hallooed with open throats.
It was the merriest music ever heard by men,
1915 that rapturous roar which for Reynard's soul
was raised.
The dogs, due their reward,
are patted, stroked and praised.
Then red fur rips—Reynard
1920 out of his pelt is prised.

Then with night drawing near they headed
homewards,
blaring their bugles with the fullness of their breath.
And at last the lord lands at his lovely home,
to find, by the heat of the fireside, his friend
1925 the good Sir Gawain, in glad spirits

on account of the company he had kept with the ladies.

His blue robe flowed as far as the floor,
his soft-furred surcoat suited him well,
and the hood which echoed it hung from his
1930 shoulders.

Both hood and coat were edged in ermine.
He meets the master in the middle of the room,
greets him graciously, with Gawain saying:

"I shall first fulfill our formal agreement
which we fixed in words when the drink flowed
1935 freely."

He clasps him tight and kisses him three times
with as much emotion as a man could muster.
"By the Almighty," said the master, "you must have
had luck

to profit such a prize—if the price was right."

"Oh fiddlesticks to the fee," said the other fellow.
1940 "As long as I have given the goods which I gained."
"By Mary," said the master, "mine's a miserable match.
I've hunted for hours with nothing to my name
but this foul-stinking fox—fling its fur to the devil—
so poor in comparison with such priceless things,
1945 these presents you impart, three kisses perfect
and true."

"Enough!" the knight entreats,
"I thank you through and through."

The standing lord then speaks
1950 of how the fox fur flew!

And with meals and mirth and minstrelsy
they made as much amusement as any mortal could,
and among those merry men and laughing ladies
Gawain and his host got giddy together;
1955 only lunatics and drunkards could have looked more
delirious.

Every person present performed party pieces
till the hour arrived when revelers must rest,
and the company in that court heard the call of their
beds.

1960 And lastly, in the hall, humbly to his host,
our knight says good night and renews his gratitude.
"Your uncountable courtesies have kept me here
this Christmas—be honored by the High King's
kindness.

If it suits, I submit myself as your servant.
But tomorrow morning I must make a move;
1965 if you will, as you promised, please appoint some
person
to guide me, God willing, towards the Green Chapel,
where my destiny will dawn on New Year's Day."

"On my honor," he replied. "With hand on heart,
every promise I made shall be put into practice."
1970 He assigns him a servant to steer his course,
to lead him through the land without losing time,
to ride the fastest route between forest
and fell.

1975 Gawain will warmly thank
his host in terms that tell;
towards the womenfolk
the knight then waves farewell.

1980 It's with a heavy heart that guests in the hall
are kissed and thanked for their care and kindness,
and they respond with speeches of the same sort,
commending him to our Savior with sorrowful sighs.
Then politely he leaves the lord and his household,
and to each person he passes he imparts his thanks
for taking such trouble in their service and assistance
1985 and such attention to detail in attendance of duty.
And every guest is grieved at the prospect of his
going,

as if honorable Gawain were one of their own.
By tapering torchlight he was taken to his room
and brought to his bed to be at his rest.
1990 But if our knight sleeps soundly I couldn't say,
for the matter in the morning might be muddying
his thoughts.
So let him lie and think,
in sight of what he sought.
1995 In time I'll tell if tricks
work out the way they ought.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The Old French word for "fox" (*goupil*) gave way to "Reynard" as a result of the immense success of stories about the cunning fox Reynard, anti-hero of the *Roman de Reynard*. [Return to reference 1](#)

FITT iv

Now night passes and New Year draws near,
drawing off darkness as our Deity decrees.
2000 But wild-looking weather was about in the world:
clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards;
the nithering north needled man's very nature;
creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.
Then a whip-cracking wind comes whistling between
hills
driving snow into deepening drifts in the dales.
2005 Alert and listening, Gawain lies in his bed;
his lids are lowered but he sleeps very little
as each crow of the cock brings his destiny closer.
Before day had dawned he was up and dressed
for the room was livened by the light of a lamp.
2010 To suit him in his metal and to saddle his mount
he called for a servant, who came quickly,
bounded from his bedsheets bringing his garments.
He swathes Sir Gawain in glorious style,
first fastening clothes to fend off the frost,
2015 then his armor, looked after all the while by the
household:
the buffed and burnished stomach and breastplates,
and the rings of chain mail, raked free of rust,
all gleaming good as new, for which he is grateful
indeed.
2020 With every polished piece
no man shone more, it seemed
from here to ancient Greece.
He sent then for his steed.
2025 He clothes himself in the costliest costume:
his coat with the brightly emblazoned badge
mounted on velvet; magical minerals

inside and set about it; embroidered seams;
a lining finished with fabulous furs.
2030 And he did not leave off the lady's lace girdle;
for his own good, Gawain won't forget that gift.
Then with his sword sheathed at his shapely hips
he bound himself twice about with the belt,
touchingly wrapped it around his waist.
2035 That green silk girdle truly suited Sir Gawain
and went well with the rich red weaves that he wore.
But our man bore the belt not merely for its beauty,
or the appeal of its pennants, polished though they
were,
or the gleam of its edges which glimmered with gold,
2040 but to save his skin when presenting himself,
without shield or sword, to the fatal swing of
the axe.

Now in his gear and gown
he turns towards those ranks
who served with such renown
2045 and offers thorough thanks.

Then his great horse Gringolet was got up ready.
The steed had been stabled in comfort and safety
and snorted and stamped in readiness for the ride.
2050 Gawain comes closer to examine his coat,
saying soberly to himself, swearing on his word:
"There are folk in this castle who keep courtesy to
the forefront;
their master maintains them—happiness to them all.
And let his lordship's lady be loved all her life.
If they choose, out of charity, to cherish a guest,
2055 showing kindness and care, then may heaven's King
who reigns over all reward them handsomely.
For as long as I live in the lands of this world
I shall practice every means in my power to repay
him."

2060 Then he steps in the stirrup and vaults to the saddle
and his servant lifts his shield which he slings on his
shoulder,
then he girds on Gringolet with his golden spurs
who clatters from the courtyard, not stalling to snort
or prance.

2065 His man was mounted, too,
who lugged the spear and lance.
"Christ keep this castle true,"
he chanted. "Grant good chance."

The drawbridge was dropped, and the double-
fronted gates
2070 were unbarred and each half was heaved wide open.
As he clears the planking he crosses himself quickly,
and praises the porter, who kneels before the prince
and prays that God be good to Gawain.

2075 Then he went on his way with the one whose task
was to point out the road to that perilous place
where the knight would receive the sorry stroke.
They scrambled up bankings where branches were
bare,

clambered up cliff faces where the cold clings.
The clouds which had climbed now cooled and
dropped

2080 so the moors and the mountains were muzzy with
mist

and every hill wore a hat of mizzle on its head.
The streams on the slopes seemed to fume and
foam,
whitening the wayside with spume and spray.
They wandered onwards through the wildest woods
till the sun, at that season, came skyward, showing
2085 its hand.

On hilly heights they ride,
snow littering the land.

The servant at his side
then has them slow and stand.

2090

"I have accompanied you across this countryside, my
lord,
and now you are near the site you have named
and have steered and searched for with such
singleness of mind.
But there's something I should like to share with
you, sir,
because upon my life, you're a lord that I love,
2095 so if you value your health you'll hear my advice:
the place you proceed to is held to be perilous.
In that wilderness lives a wildman, the worst in the
world,
he is brooding and brutal and loves bludgeoning
people.
He's more powerful than any person alive on this
2100 earth
and four times the figure of any fighting knight
in Arthur's house, or Hector² or any other hero.
He chooses the green chapel for his grim goings-on,
and to pass through that place unscathed is
impossible,
for he deals out death blows by dint of his hands,
2105 a man without measure who shows no mercy.
Be it chaplain or churl who rides by the chapel,
monk or priest, whatever man or person,
he loves murdering more than he loves his own life.
So I say, just as sure as you sit in your saddle,
2110 if you come there you'll be killed, of that there's no
question.
Trust me, he could trample you twenty times over
or more.
He's lurked about too long
engaged in grief and gore.

2115 His hits are swift and strong—
 he'll fell you to the floor."

 "Therefore, good Sir Gawain, let the man go,
 and for God's sake travel an alternate track,
 ride another road, and be rescued by Christ.
2120 I'll head off home, and with hand on heart
 I shall swear by God and all his good saints,
 and on all earthly holiness, and other such oaths,
 that your secret is safe, and not a soul will know
 that you fled in fear from the fellow I described."

2125 "Many thanks," said Gawain, in a terse tone of voice,
 "and for having my interests at heart, be lucky.
 I'm certain such a secret would be silent in your
 keep.

 But as faithful as you are, if I failed to find him
 and were to flee in fear in the fashion you urge,
2130 I'd be christened a coward, and could not be
 excused.

 So I'll trek to the chapel and take my chances,
 say my piece to that person, speak with him plainly,
 whether fairness or foulness follows, however fate
 behaves.

2135 He may be stout and stern
 and standing armed with stave,
 but those who strive to serve
 our Lord, our Lord will save."

2140 "By Mary," said the servant, "you seem to be saying
 you're hell-bent on heaping harm on yourself
 and losing your life, so I'll delay you no longer.
 Set your helmet on your head and your lance in your
 hand

 and ride a route through that rocky ravine
 till you're brought to the bottom of that foreboding
2145 valley,

then look towards a glade a little to the left
 and you'll see in the clearing the site itself,
 and the hulking person who inhabits the place.
 Now God bless and good-bye, brave Sir Gawain;
 for all the wealth in the world I wouldn't walk with
 2150 you
 or go further in this forest by a single footstep."
 With a wrench on the reins he reeled around
 and heel-kicked the horse as hard as he could,
 and was gone from Gawain, galloping hard
 for home.
 2155 "By Christ, I will not cry,"
 announced the knight, "or groan,
 but find my fortune by
 the grace of God alone."

 2160 Then he presses ahead, picks up a path,
 enters a steep-sided grove on his steed
 then goes by and by to the bottom of a gorge
 where he wonders and watches—it looks a wild
 place:
 no sign of a settlement anywhere to be seen
 but heady heights to both halves of the valley
 2165 and set with saber-toothed stones of such sharpness
 no cloud in the sky could escape unscratched.
 He stalls and halts, holds the horse still,
 glances side to side to glimpse the green chapel
 but sees no such thing, which he thinks is strange,
 2170 except at mid-distance what might be a mound,
 a sort of bald knoll on the bank of a brook
 where fell water surged with frenzied force,
 bursting with bubbles as if it had boiled.
 He heels the horse, heads for that mound,
 2175 grounds himself gracefully and tethers Gringolet,
 looping the reins to the limb of a lime.
 Then he strides forwards and circles the feature,

2180 baffled as to what that bizarre hill could be:
it had a hole at one end and at either side,
and its walls, matted with weeds and moss,
enclosed a cavity, like a kind of old cave
or crevice in the crag—it was all too unclear to
declare.

2185 “Green Church?” chunters the knight.
“More like the devil’s lair
where at the nub of night
he dabbles in dark prayers.”

2190 “For certain,” he says, “this is a soulless spot,
a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass,
the kind of kirk where that camouflaged man
might deal in devotions on the devil’s behalf.
My five senses inform me that Satan himself
has tricked me in this tryst, intending to destroy me.
This is a haunted house—may it go to hell.
2195 I never came across a church so cursed.”
With head helmeted and lance in hand
he scrambled towards skylight in that strange abyss.
Then he heard on the hillside, from behind a hard
rock
and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise.
2200 What! It cannoned though the cliffs as if they might
crack,
like the scream of a scythe being ground on a stone.
What! It whined and wailed, like a waterwheel.
What! It rasped and rang, raw on the ear.
2205 “My God,” cried Gawain, “that grinding is a greeting.
My arrival is honored with the honing of an axe
up there.

 Then let the Lord decide.
 ‘Oh well,’ won’t help me here.
 I might well lose my life
2210 but freak sounds hold no fear.”

Then Gawain called as loudly as his lungs would
allow,
"Who has power in this place to honor his pact?
Because good Gawain now walks on this ground.
If anyone wants anything then hurry and appear
2215 to do what he needs—it's now or it's never."
"Abide," came a voice from above the bank.
"You'll cop for what's coming to you quickly enough."
Yet he went at his work, whetting the blade,
not showing until it was sharpened and stropped.
2220 Then out of the crags he comes, through the cave
mouth,
whirling into view with a wondrous weapon,
a Danish-style axe for dealing the dint,
with a brute of a blade curving back to the haft
filed on a stone, a four footer at least
2225 by the look of the length of its shining lace.
And again he was green, as a year ago,
with green flesh, hair and beard, and a fully green
face,
and firmly on green feet he came stomping
forwards,
the handle of that axe like a staff in his hand.
2230 At the edge of the water, he will not wade
but vaults the stream with the shaft, and strides
with an ominous face onto earth covered over
with snow.
Our brave knight bowed, his head
2235 hung low—but not too low!
"Sweet Sir," the green man said,
"Your visit keeps your vow."

The green knight spoke again, "God guard you,
Gawain.
Welcome to my world after all your wandering.

2240 You have timed your arrival like a true traveler,
honoring the terms that entwine us together.
Twelvemonths ago at this time you took what was
yours,
and with New Year come you are called to account.
2245 We're very much alone, beyond view in this valley,
no person to part us—we can do as we please.
Pull your helmet from your head and take what
you're owed.

Show no more struggle than I showed myself
when you severed my head with a single smite."
2250 "No," said good Gawain, "by my life-giving God,
I won't gripe or begrudge the grimness to come,
so keep to one stroke and I'll stand stock-still,
won't whisper a word of unwillingness, or one
complaint."

2255 He bowed to take the blade
and bared his neck and nape,
but, loath to look afraid,
he feigned a fearless state.

2260 Suddenly the green knight summons up his strength,
hoists the axe high over Gawain's head,
lifts it aloft with every fiber of his life
and begins to bring home a bone-splitting blow.
Had he seen it through as thoroughly as threatened
the knight, being brave, would have died from the
blow.

2265 But glimpsing the axe at the edge of his eye
bringing death earthwards as it arced through the
air,
and sensing its sharpness, Gawain shrank at the
shoulders.

The swinging axman swerved from his stroke,
and reproached the young prince with some proud
words:

2270 "You are not Gawain," he goaded, "with his good
name,
who faced down every foe in the field of battle
but now flinches with fear at the foretaste of harm.
Never could I hear of such cowardice from that
knight.

Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe,
or carp or quibble in King Arthur's castle,
2275 or flap when my head went flying to my feet?
But entirely untouched, you are terror struck.
I'll be found the better fellow, since you were so
feeble

and frail."

2280 Gawain confessed, "I flinched
at first, but will not fail.
Though once my head's unhitched
it's off once and for all!"

"So be brisk with the blow, bring on the blade.
Deal me my destiny and do it out of hand,
2285 and I'll stand the stroke without shiver or shudder
and be wasted by your weapon. You have my word."
"Take this then," said the other, throwing up the axe,
with a menacing glare like the gaze of a maniac.

2290 Then he launches his swing but leaves him
unscathed,
withholds his arm before harm could be done.
And Gawain was motionless, never moved a muscle,
but stood stone-still, or as still as a tree stump
anchored in the earth by a hundred roots.

2295 Then the warrior in green mocked Gawain again:
"Now you've plucked up your courage I'll dispatch
you properly.

May the honorable knighthood heaped on you by
Arthur—
if it proves to be powerful—protect your neck."

That insulting slur drew a spirited response:
2300 "Thrash away then, thug, your threats are hollow.
Such huffing and fussing—you'll frighten your own
heart."

"By God," said the green man, "since you speak so
grandly
there'll be no more shilly-shallying, I shall shatter
you,

I vow."

2305 He stands to strike, a sneer
comes over lip and brow.
Gawain is gripped by fear,
no hope of rescue now.

Hoisted and aimed, the axe hurtled downwards,
2310 the blade bearing down on the knight's bare neck,
a ferocious blow, but far from being fatal
it skewed to one side, just skimming the skin
and finely snicking the fat of the flesh
so that bright red blood shot from body to earth.

2315 Seeing it shining on the snowy ground
Gawain leapt forward a spear's length at least,
grabbed hold of his helmet and rammed it on his
head,
brought his shield to his side with a shimmy of his
shoulder,
then brandished his sword before blurting out brave
words,

2320 because never since birth, as his mother's babe,
was he half as happy as here and now.

"Enough swiping, sir, you've swung your swing.
I've borne one blow without backing out,
go for me again and you'll get some by return,
2325 with interest! Hit out, and be hit in an instant,
and hard.

One axe attack—that's all.

Now keep the covenant
agreed in Arthur's hall
and hold the axe in hand."

2330

The warrior steps away and leans on his weapon,
props the handle in the earth and slouches on the
head

and studies how Gawain is standing his ground,
bold in his bearing, brave in his actions,
armed and ready. In his heart he admires him.

2335

Then remarking merrily, but in a mighty voice,
with reaching words he rounded on the knight:
"Be a mite less feisty, fearless young fellow,
you've suffered no insulting or heinous incident
beyond the game we agreed on in the court of your
king.

2340

One strike was promised—consider yourself well
paid!

From any lingering loyalties you are hereby released.
Had I mustered all my muscles into one mighty blow
I would have hit more harshly and done you great
harm.

2345

But my first strike fooled you—a feint, no less—
not fracturing your flesh, which was only fair
in keeping with the contract we declared that first
night,

for with truthful behavior you honored my trust
and gave up your gains as a good man should.

2350

Then I missed you once more, and this for the
morning

when you kissed my pretty wife then kindly kissed
me.

So twice you were truthful, therefore twice I left
no scar.

The person who repays
will live to feel no fear.

2355 The third time, though, you strayed,
 and felt my blade therefore."

 "Because the belt you are bound with belongs to
 me;
 it was woven by my wife so I know it very well.
 And I know of your courtesies, and conduct, and
2360 kisses,
 and the wooing of my wife—for it was all my work!
 I sent her to test you—and in truth it turns out
 you're by the far the most faultless fellow on earth.
 As a pearl is more prized than a pea which is white,
 in good faith, so is Gawain, amongst gallant knights.
2365 But a little thing more—it was loyalty that you
 lacked:
 not because you're wicked, or a womanizer, or
 worse,
 but you loved your own life; so I blame you less."
 Gawain stood speechless for what seemed a great
 while,
 so shocked and ashamed that he shuddered inside.
2370 The fire of his blood brought flames to his face
 and he shrank out of shame at what the other had
 said.
 Then he tried to talk, and finding his tongue, said:
 "A curse upon cowardice and covetousness.
 They breed villainy and vice, and destroy all virtue."
2375 Then he grabbed the girdle and ungathered its knot
 and flung it in fury at the man before him.
 "My downfall and undoing; let the devil take it.
 Dread of the death blow and cowardly doubts
2380 meant I gave in to greed, and in doing so forgot
 the freedom and fidelity every knight knows to
 follow.
 And now I am found to be flawed and false,

through treachery and untruth I have totally failed,”
said

Gawain.

2385 “Such terrible mistakes,
and I shall bear the blame.
But tell me what it takes
to clear my clouded name.”

The green lord laughed, and leniently replied:
2390 “The harm which you caused me is wholly healed.
By confessing your failings you are free from fault
and have openly paid penance at the point of my
axe.

I declare you purged, as polished and as pure
as the day you were born, without blemish or blame.
2395 And this gold-hemmed girdle I present as a gift,
which is green like my gown. It’s yours, Sir Gawain,
a reminder of our meeting when you mix and mingle
with princes and kings. And this keepsake will be
proof
to all chivalrous knights of your challenge in this
chapel.

2400 But follow me home. New Year’s far from finished—
we’ll resume our reveling with supper and song.

What’s more
my wife is waiting there
who flummoxed you before.
2405 This time you’ll have in her
a friend and not a foe.”

“Thank you,” said the other, taking helmet from
head,
holding it in hand as he offered his thanks.
“But I’ve loitered long enough. The Lord bless your
life

2410 and bestow on you such honor as you surely
deserve.
And mind you commend me to your fair wife,
both to her and the other, those honorable ladies
who kidded me so cleverly with their cunning tricks.
But no wonder if a fool finds his way into folly
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile—
2415 it's the way of the world. Adam fell because of a
woman,
and Solomon because of several, and as for Samson,
Delilah was his downfall, and afterwards David
was bamboozled by Bathsheba and bore the grief.³
All wrecked and ruined by their wrongs; if only
2420 we could love our ladies without believing their lies.
And those were foremost of all whom fortune
favored,
excellent beyond all others existing under heaven,"
he cried.
"Yet all were charmed and changed
2425 by wily womankind.
I suffered just the same,
but clear me of my crime."

"But the girdle," he went on, "God bless you for this
gift.
And I shall wear it with good will, but not for its
2430 gold,
nor its silks and streamers, and not for the sake
of its wonderful workmanship or even its worth,
but as a sign of my sin—I'll see it as such
when I swagger in the saddle—a sad reminder
2435 that the frailty of his flesh is man's biggest fault,
how the touch of filth taints his tender frame.
So when praise for my prowess in arms swells my
pride,
one look at this love-lace will lessen my ardor.

But I will ask one thing, if it won't offend:
2440 since I stayed so long in your lordship's land
and was hosted in your house—let Him reward you
who upholds the heavens and sits upon high—
will you make known your name? And I'll ask
nothing else."

"Then I'll treat you to the truth," the other told him,
2445 "Here in my homelands they call me Bertilak de
Hautdesert.

And in my manor lives the mighty Morgan le Fay,
so adept and adroit in the dark arts,
who learned magic from Merlin—the master of
mystery—
for in earlier times she was intimately entwined
2450 with that knowledgeable man, as all you knights
know

back home.
Yes, 'Morgan the Goddess'—
I will announce her name.
There is no nobleness
she cannot take and tame."

2455 "She guided me in this guise to your great hall
to put pride on trial, and to test with this trick
what distinction and trust the Round Table deserves.
She imagined this mischief would muddle your minds
and that grieving Guinevere would go to her grave
2460 at the sight of a specter making ghostly speeches
with his head in his hands before the high table.
So that ancient woman who inhabits my home
is also your aunt—Arthur's half sister,
the daughter of the duchess of Tintagel; the duchess
2465 who through Uther, was mother to Arthur, your king.
So I ask you again, come and greet your aunt
and make merry in my house; you're much loved
there,

and, by my faith, I am as fond of you my friend
as any man under God, for your great truth.”
2470 But Gawain would not. No way would he go.
So they clasped and kissed and made kind
commendations
to the Prince of Paradise, and then parted in the
cold,
that pair.

2475 Our man, back on his mount
now hurtles home from there.
The green knight leaves his ground
to wander who-knows-where.

So he winds through the wilds of the world once
more,
2480 Gawain on Gringolet, by the grace of God,
under a roof sometimes and sometimes roughing it,
and in valleys and vales had adventures and victories
but time is too tight to tell how they went.
The nick to his neck was healed by now;
thereabouts he had bound the belt like a baldric—
2485 slantwise, as a sash, from shoulder to side,
laced in a knot looped below his left arm,
as a sign that his honor was stained by sin.
So safe and sound he sets foot in court,
and great joy came to the king in his castle
2490 when tidings of Gawain’s return had been told.
The king kissed his knight and so did the queen,
and Gawain was embraced by his band of brothers,
who made eager enquiries, and he answered them
all
with the tale of his trial and tribulations,
2495 and the challenge at the chapel, and the great green
chap,
and the love of the lady, which led to the belt.

And he showed them the scar at the side of his
 neck,
 confirming his breach of faith, like a badge
 of blame.
 2500 He grimaced with disgrace,
 he writhed in rage and pain.
 Blood flowed towards his face
 and showed his smarting shame.

2505 "Regard," said Gawain, as he held up the girdle,
 "the symbol of sin, for which my neck bears the
 scar;
 a sign of my fault and offence and failure,
 of the cowardice and covetousness I came to
 commit.
 I was tainted by untruth. This, its token,
 I will drape across my chest till the day I die.
 2510 For man's crimes can be covered but never made
 clean;
 once sin is entwined it is attached for all time."
 The king gave comfort, then the whole of the court
 allow, as they laugh in lovely accord,
 2515 that the lords and ladies who belong to the Table,
 every knight in the brotherhood, should bear such a
 belt,
 a bright green belt worn obliquely to the body,
 crosswise, like a sash, for the sake of this man.
 So that slanting green stripe was adopted as their
 sign,
 2520 and each knight who held it was honored ever after,
 as all the best books on romance remind us:
 an adventure which happened in Arthur's era,
 as the chronicles of this country have stated clearly.
 Since fearless Brutus first set foot
 2525 on these shores, once the siege land assault at Troy
 had ceased,

our coffers have been crammed
with stories such as these.
Now let our Lord, thorn-crowned,
bring us to perfect peace. AMEN.

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE⁴

Endnotes

- Note 2: The greatest of the Trojan warriors in the Trojan War.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Lines 2146–49 single out well-known male figures from the Hebrew Scriptures whom Gawain reads as having fallen on account of female deception. The relevant references are as follows: for Adam, Genesis 3:6; Solomon, 1 Kings 11:3; Samson, Judges 16:4–18; and David, 2 Samuel 11:1–15.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: “Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind” (Anglo-Norman French). This is practically identical to the motto of the Order of the Garter (“Honi soit qui mal y pense”). The order was founded ca. 1350; apparently a copyist of the poem associated this order with the one founded to honor Gawain.[Return to reference 4](#)

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

ca. 1340–1400

Medieval thinkers traditionally held that society was made up of three “estates”: the nobility, or hereditary aristocracy whose mission on earth was to rule and defend the whole; the church, whose duty it was to look after society’s spiritual welfare; and laborers, the commoners who made up the majority and were supposed to provide for society’s physical needs. But by the late fourteenth century, these basic categories were looking increasingly inadequate. The growing and prosperous middle class did not fit in neatly among the three estates. Social strata were becoming less fixed and more entangled, as wealth, profession, and personal ability (not just parentage or religious ordination) helped determine one’s status and role. It was into the ascendant middle classes that Geoffrey Chaucer was born. Chaucer’s life and works, especially *The Canterbury Tales*, were shaped by these large-scale changes and by the need to develop vocabulary and imaginative forms adequate to the new social reality. (For Chaucer’s portrait, see [p. 472](#) and the color insert in this volume.)

Chaucer was the grandson of a shoemaker (a “chausseur,” whose profession gave the family its name) and the son of a prosperous wine merchant. He probably spent his boyhood in the mercantile atmosphere of London’s Vintry, where ships docked with wines from France and Spain. Here he would have mixed daily with people of all sorts, heard several languages spoken, become fluent in French, and

received schooling in Latin. Instead of apprenticing Chaucer to the family business, however, his father was apparently able to place him, in his early teens, as a page in one of the great aristocratic households of England—that of the countess of Ulster, who was married to Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. There Chaucer would acquire the manners and skills required for a career in the service of the nobility. It is notable that throughout his career he wrote poetry exploring the idea that true nobility comes from character rather than noble birth.

We can trace Chaucer's professional and personal life in a considerable number of surviving historical documents, beginning with a reference, in Elizabeth of Ulster's household accounts, to an outfit he received as a page (1357). He was captured by the French and ransomed in one of Edward III's campaigns during the Hundred Years' War (1359). He was a member of King Edward's personal household (1367) and took part in several diplomatic missions to Spain (1366), France (1368), and Italy (1372–73, 1378). As controller of customs on wool, sheepskins, and leather for the port of London (1374–85), Chaucer audited and kept books on the export taxes, which were one of the Crown's main sources of revenue. During this period he was living in an apartment over one of the gates in the city wall. He served as a justice of the peace and knight of the shire (the title given to members of Parliament) for the county of Kent (1385–86), where he moved after giving up the controllership. As clerk of the king's works (1389–91), Chaucer was responsible for the maintenance of numerous royal residences, parks, and other holdings; his duties included supervising the construction of the nave of Westminster Abbey as well as architecture for a celebrated tournament staged by Richard II. While the records show Chaucer receiving many grants and annuities in addition to his salary for these services, they also show that at times he was being pressed by creditors and obliged to borrow money. One potentially disturbing life-record was thought to concern the subject of rape. In 1380 Cecily Chaumpaigne, a London baker's daughter, released Chaucer from a claim of "*raptus*" (that is, either "abduction" or "rape"). Persuaded that this claim involved a charge of sexual

violence against Chaucer, modern scholars productively focused on gender relations in Chaucer's poetry. This scholarship remains powerful and valuable, even as work published in 2022 revealed that Chaumpaigne and Chaucer were partners in a legal case apparently having nothing to do with rape, and that "*raptus*" in the document seems to have meant "abduction."



Middle-class Prosperity. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434. Note the way the religious elements of the scene are secondary to the fine, rich qualities of fabric represented here.

None of the documents concerning Chaucer's life contains any hint that Chaucer wrote poetry, although it is clear that literature would have been part of his life from the schoolroom onward. Poetry was among the entertainments enjoyed in courtly households at the time of Chaucer's youth—poetry in French, which remained the fashionable language of the English aristocracy. Chaucer's earliest poetic work indicates the influence of French writers such as Guillaume de Machaut (1300?–1377) and Jean Froissart (1333?–1400?), whose lyrics and narratives recount the emotional turbulence of erotic love, often in the framework of the poet's dream. Chaucer's first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, is a dream vision that laments a lost beloved, written to commemorate the young duchess of Lancaster, the first wife of the powerful nobleman John of Gaunt; she died in 1368. Chaucer almost certainly met or heard younger French poets, such as Froissart and Eustache Deschamps (1346–1406/7), during the time when the French king was imprisoned in London following one of the many battles of the Hundred Years' War. In Chaucer's time, many of the motifs and conventions of French poetry derived from the thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose*, a long dream allegory in French featuring a dreamer in obsessive pursuit of an eroticized rosebud. There is evidence that Chaucer translated sections of the *Romance of the Rose* early in his career.

The diplomatic mission that sent Chaucer to Italy in 1372 is often regarded as a milestone in his literary development. Although he may have acquired some knowledge of the Italian language from merchants and bankers posted in London, this visit and a subsequent one to Florence (1378) brought him into direct contact with the extraordinary artistic flourishing—both literary and visual—of fourteenth-century Italy. He likely acquired manuscripts of works by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—the last two men were still alive at the time of his visit, though there is no evidence that he met them. These writers provided Chaucer with models of new verse forms (including iambic pentameter), new subject matter, and new modes of representation. His *House of Fame* takes the poet on a journey in the talons of a gigantic eagle to the celestial palace of the goddess Fame, a trip that at many points affectionately parodies Dante's

journey in the *Divine Comedy*. Boccaccio provided sources for two of Chaucer's finest poems—although Chaucer never mentions the Italian poet by name. *The Knight's Tale*, the first of *The Canterbury Tales*, is based on Boccaccio's romance *Il Teseida* (The Story of Theseus). Chaucer's longest completed poem, *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1385), is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (The Love-Stricken). In beautiful and psychologically astute verse, the poem recounts the misadventures of two Trojans, Prince Troilus and the widow Criseyde, who fall passionately in love during the Trojan War. Even if he had never written *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde* would have secured Chaucer a place among the major English poets.

Throughout his life Chaucer also wrote moral and religious works, chiefly translations, which show that he knew Latin as well as French and Italian. One of the most important of these was his translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, originally written in Latin around 524 C.E. by Boethius, a Roman statesman and philosopher who composed the text in prison while he awaited execution for crimes for which he had been unjustly condemned. The *Consolation* was a favorite book of medieval readers and was a source for the popular personification of Fortune as a fickle woman, turning her wheel to bring success and disaster. The *Consolation* also provided an accessible framework for thinking through one of the major puzzles of Christianity: how God's foreknowledge could exist alongside human free will. Chaucer added important Boethian passages to both *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. His lyric the *Balade de bon conseil* (Ballad of Good Counsel) compresses Boethian and Christian teachings into three stanzas of plain-spoken moral advice.

Chaucer's writings are full of different kinds of learning. It is clear that he was familiar with classical myths as well as handbooks for priests, the technical jargon of London craftsmen and the teachings of the early Church Fathers, technicalities of astronomy and an array of saints' lives. He must have had access to a considerable number of books. Manuscripts in Chaucer's day were quite expensive, thanks to the costly sheets of treated animal skin on which they were often written as well as to the time-consuming labor of copying them.

Chaucer's personal and professional connections probably gave him access to books in such venues as religious institutions, court and government offices, and well-to-do households, as well as in trade. However, when Chaucer's poetry invokes a branch of learned expertise, we shouldn't assume he knew the discipline exhaustively. Scholars in the Middle Ages often created reference works, gathering snippets of many different sources together in one volume. Someone may seem to have read dozens of books, when they'd really consulted just one! Chaucer is likely to have relied on encyclopedic resources like these in cultivating his learning.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Chaucer's poetry is the juxtaposition of idioms and genres to create new effects. This literary habit of code-switching reflects his biography: his career brought him into contact with diverse bourgeois and aristocratic worlds, without his being securely anchored in any one of them. His experiments with multivocal compilation are realized most fully in *The Canterbury Tales*, where language's differentiation according to factors of profession, class, age, gender, and moral character is simultaneously a major stylistic feature and a central thematic concern. Part of the challenge of reading Chaucer's writing is keeping up with its quicksilver shifts of tone, genre, and voice.

This collaging of voices often makes it difficult to extract simple, direct meanings from Chaucer's writings—an interpretive effect that can make his texts seem especially open-minded and modern. Yet this indeterminacy is not necessarily emancipatory. In some cases, Chaucer's writings give literary expression to hierarchy and violence. *The Prioress's Tale* is a finely wrought work of anti-Judaism, which repeats the false accusation that Jews kill Christian children. *The Man of Law's Tale* is an Islamophobic work, which portrays the Muslim mother of the Sultan as a depraved and bloodthirsty fanatic. Some recent readers have sought to preserve Chaucer's moral standing by blaming the tale-teller pilgrims rather than their author. Yet it is clear from surviving evidence that for at least some of Chaucer's early audience, such stories were read not ironically but earnestly, as affirmations of their expressed ideological values. As is true for the canon of English literature more generally, Chaucer's writings are not

immune to the fantasies of domination and superiority upon which they offer comment.

Looking at Chaucer's legacy, we can conclude that the most important factor in the poet's later literary fame is that he wrote his poetry in English (and, even more particularly, in a version of the dialect that was to become the national standard). Throughout the fifteenth century, Chaucer was a touchstone for poets who likewise wrote in the vernacular, including Thomas Hoccleve (ca. 1367–1426; see [pp. 589–99](#)), John Lydgate (1371–1449), and the Scottish poet Robert Henryson (d. ca. 1490; see [pp. 678–81](#)). These poets paid homage especially to Chaucer's elevation of the English language, making it a vehicle for the highest rhetorical register. Later editors and audiences continued to consolidate Chaucer's reputation until he was very much a literary institution.

In the late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, a surprising array of writers have returned to Chaucer's corpus, especially *The Canterbury Tales*, and found new possibilities. For instance, the African American novelist Gloria Naylor riffs on the framework of the Canterbury pilgrimage in her 1992 novel *Bailey's Café* (the name of its main narrator alludes to Harry Bailey, convener of Chaucer's tale-telling game). The Nigerian novelist Karen King-Aribisala, in her 1998 story collection *Kicking Tongues*, repurposes Chaucer's narrative frame for a journey to the Nigerian capital. The Black British poet Patience Agbabi (featured in volume F of this anthology) presents a "remix" of *The Canterbury Tales* in her 2014 *Telling Tales*. And the 2016 collection *Refugee Tales* (ed. David Herd and Anna Pincus) assumes the loose structure of the Canterbury pilgrimage to collect various tales of immigration, displacement, and statelessness. The many voices of Chaucer's original writings have continued to be refracted into different idioms and perspectives.

The text here is drawn from David Lawton's *The Norton Chaucer* (2019). However, the spelling of all texts by Chaucer has been modernized wherever modernization does not impair meter or rhyme. All the poetic texts by Chaucer here should be read so as to produce a five-stress line, with an iambic meter following the pattern

x / x / x / x / x / (x), where x = an unstressed syllable and / = a stressed syllable. The final unstressed syllable is optional. If a word ends in a vowel, and the following word begins with a vowel, the final syllable of the first word can be elided with the first syllable of the following word. The language produced is designed for maximize legibility; we sacrifice philological and phonological coherence with that aim in mind. Students should not base any understanding of Chaucer's language on these texts. More extensive discussion of the sounds and meter of Middle English is included in the volume's introduction ([pp. 21–24](#)). Glosses are also based on Lawton's edition, with many additions of our own.

The Canterbury Tales Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales*—if we assume it to be the same as that which the fictional Host proposes at the end of *The General Prologue*—projected about one hundred twenty stories, two for each pilgrim to tell on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Chaucer actually completed only twenty-two and the beginnings of two others. He did write an ending, however—for the Host says to the Parson that everyone except him has told “his tale.”

Little is known about the origins of *The Canterbury Tales*, but it was perhaps first conceived in 1386, when Chaucer was living in Greenwich, some miles east of London. From his house he might have been able to see the pilgrim road that led toward the shrine of the famous English saint Thomas à Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in his cathedral in 1170. Medieval pilgrims were notorious tale-tellers, and the sight and sound of the groups riding toward Canterbury may well have suggested to Chaucer the idea of using a fictitious pilgrimage as a framing device for a number of stories. Collections of stories linked by such a device were common in the later Middle Ages. Chaucer's contemporary John Gower had used one in his *Lover's Confession* (see [p. 578](#)). The most famous medieval framing tale besides Chaucer's is Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1353), in which ten different narrators each tell a tale a day for ten days. Chaucer perhaps knew the *Decameron*, which contains a few tales with plots analogous to those found in *The Canterbury Tales*, but these stories were widespread, and there is no proof that Chaucer got them from Boccaccio.

In any case, Chaucer's artistic exploitation of the tale-telling device is altogether his own. Whereas in Gower a single speaker relates all the stories, and in Boccaccio the ten speakers—three young gentlemen and seven young ladies—all belong to the same sophisticated social elite, Chaucer's pilgrim narrators represent a wide spectrum of ranks and occupations. The fine delineation of social distinctions should not, however, be mistaken for novelistic or documentary “realism.” It is highly unlikely that a group like

Chaucer's pilgrims would ever have joined together and communicated on such apparently egalitarian terms. That is part of the fiction, as is the tacit assumption that a group so large could have ridden along listening to one another tell tales in verse. The variety of tellers is matched by the diversity of their tales. In numerous instances, tales are assigned to appropriate narrators and juxtaposed to bring out contrasts in genre, style, tone, and ethical code. Thus the Knight's courtly romance about the rivalry of two noble lovers for a lady is followed by the story of a very different love triangle, the Miller's fabliau (a medieval genre of bawdy and humorous narrative, usually featuring commoners as protagonists). For several of *The Canterbury Tales*, the tale takes on new overtones and significance from what we have learned of its teller in *The General Prologue*. In turn, the teller's character seems to be revealed by the story told. In this way, Chaucer conducts two fictions simultaneously—that of the individual tale and that of the pilgrim to whom he has assigned it.

Chaucer develops this second fiction not only in *The General Prologue* but also through the "links," or interchanges between pilgrims, connecting their stories. These interchanges sometimes lead to quarrels. For example, *The Miller's Tale* offends the Reeve, who is not only the manager of an estate or farm (the meaning of "reeve") but also a carpenter. He understands the character of the Miller's foolish, cuckolded carpenter to be a personal attack, and he retaliates with a story satirizing an arrogant miller very much like the pilgrim Miller. The antagonism of the two tellers provides comedy in the links and enhances the comedy of their tales. The links also offer literary commentary on the tales by members of the pilgrim audience, especially the Host, whom the pilgrims have declared "governor" and "judge" of the storytelling. Further dramatic interest is created by the fact that several tales respond to topics taken up by previous tellers. The Wife of Bath's thesis that women should have sovereignty over men in marriage gets a reply from the Clerk, which in turn elicits responses from the Merchant and the Franklin. However, each tale has its own interest quite apart from the framing fiction. This is clear from their later history: some tales circulated

independently, copied on their own without the tale-telling frame. Yet no other framing fiction in medieval literature has such varied and lively interactions between the larger frame and the individual stories: the tale-tellers are central to Chaucer's innovative literary design.

Therefore we singes alle q^{we} p^{er}fecte
 If y^e p^{er}fecte thynke q^{we} varye as in my^e cause
 Is thus though that I telle com^{me} what moore
 All p^{er}fecte than ye han herd before
 Com^{me} p^{er}fecte in this l^{et}ter h^{er}e
 To enforse with theff^{er} of my^e w^{er}te
 And though I nat the cause w^{er}te
 As ye han herd yet to p^{er}fecte alle q^{we} p^{er}fecte
 p^{er}fecte me nat for as in my^e sentence
 Shal ye w^{er}te syn^{er} syn^{er} difference
 ffor the sentence of this h^{er}e l^{et}ter
 af^{er} the which this my^e tale I w^{er}te
 And thefor^e syn^{er} h^{er}e p^{er}fecte q^{we} shal seye
 And lat me tellen al my^e tale q^{we} p^{er}fecte

ExPLICIT

Therē bigymeth Chaucers tale of welles



Thoung man called yelous myghty and yere great
 dyen his wyf that called was prudence a daughter
 whiche that called was wyse. Upon a day whilp
 he for his request is sent in to the feelde hym to pleye
 his wyf and eke his daughter hath he left inwith his hous of which
 the doores egeu faste yshut. The of hys olde fere han it espyed
 and gotten laddres to the Galles of his hous and by ymmedies
 been entres and betten his wyf and boundes his daughter with
 fyue mortal woundes in fyue ony wy plases. This is to sayn in
 hir feet. in hyr handes. in hyr eyes. in hyr nose. and in hyr mouth
 And lesen hyr for deed and senten a wy. **¶** Whan yelous is
 tonyed was in to his hous and sangh all this melodye. he lye a
 wad man yertynge his clothes gan to wepe and crye. **¶** And
 he his wyf as forsoth as she dothe dysoughte hym of his daryng
 for to styrte but nat for thy he gan to crye and wepen eke lenger
 the moore. **¶** This noble wy prudence remembreth hyr upon the
 genterte of prude in his booke that cleped is the remerie of lous
 wyf as he couth he is a fool that remembreth the moore to wepen in
 the deeth of hyr thus. til she haue sent hyr fille as for a certen
 tyme. And thaimne shal man don his diligensce with amysable
 wordes hyr to recomferte and preyen hyr of hyr daryng for to
 styrte. **¶** For whiche reson this noble wy prudence duffed hyr
 houndes for to wepe and crye as for a certen tyme. And whan
 she caught hyr tyme she cryde hym in this wyse. **¶** Allas my
 lord quod she why make ye your self for to be lyk a fool for so
 the it aperteneth nat to a wys man to maken soch a word. **¶** Your

Chaucer Portrait. A page from the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9, fol. 153v. Chaucer remains unnamed as a pilgrim in the text of *The Canterbury Tales*, but the very early, decorated Ellesmere manuscript (ca. 1400) gives him high profile in this apparently verisimilar pilgrim portrait, the model of most later Chaucer portraits (including that in Thomas Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*). Chaucer's image is placed so as to underline his fame, but it is placed beside, and pointing to, a prose text told by the Chaucer pilgrim, the serious *Melibee*, devoted to avoidance of civil war.

It is not possible to date the composition of any of the tales with precision. Most of them were probably written during the last fourteen years of Chaucer's life, although a few seem likely to have been drafted earlier and inserted into *The Canterbury Tales* with minimal revisions. The popularity of the poem in late medieval England is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts: more than eighty, none from Chaucer's lifetime. It was also twice printed by William Caxton, who introduced printing to England in 1476, and it was often reprinted by Caxton's early successors. The manuscripts reflect the unfinished state of the poem—when he died, Chaucer had not established a definitive version. Inconsistencies among the surviving copies suggest a process of experimentation and revision. Within the manuscripts, *The Canterbury Tales* falls into at least seven, possibly more, blocks of tales. The order of the tales within each block is generally the same, but the order of the blocks within the manuscripts varies widely. The block containing *The General Prologue*; the Knight's, Miller's, and Reeve's tales; and the Cook's unfinished tale always comes first, and the group consisting of *The Parson's Tale* and *The Retraction* always comes last. But the others, such as that containing the Wife of Bath's, the Friar's, and the Summoner's tales, or that consisting of the Physician's and Pardoner's tales, or the longest block, consisting of six tales concluding with the Nun's Priest's tale, are by no means stable in

relation to one another. The order followed here, that of the Ellesmere manuscript, has been adopted as the most nearly satisfactory.

The General Prologue

Chaucer did not need to make a pilgrimage himself to meet the types of people that his fictitious pilgrimage includes, because most of them had long inhabited literature as well as life: the ideal Knight, who had taken part in all the major expeditions and battles of Christian warfare during the last half-century; his fashionably dressed son, the Squire, a typical young lover; the lady Prioress, the hunting Monk, and the flattering Friar (all of whom practice the little vanities and larger vices for which such ecclesiastics were conventionally attacked); the prosperous Franklin; the greedy Doctor of Medicine; the lusty and domineering Wife of Bath; the austere Parson; and so on down through the lower orders to that spellbinding preacher the Pardoner, peddling his paper indulgences and phony relics. One meets these types throughout medieval literature, but particularly in a genre called estates satire, which sets out to expose and ridicule typical examples of corruption at all levels of society. A remarkable number of details in *The General Prologue* could have been taken straight from works of estates satire.

Although it has been argued that some of the pilgrims are portraits of actual people, the impression that they are drawn from life is likely to be a function of Chaucer's distinctive artistry rather than his documentary accuracy. The salient features of each pilgrim seem to leap out at the reader, as they might to an observer concerned only with what meets the eye. This imitation of the way our minds perceive reality may make us fail to notice the care with which Chaucer has selected his details to give an integrated sketch of the person being described. Most of these details give something more than mere lifelikeness to the description. The pilgrims' facial features, the clothes they wear, the foods they like to eat, the things they say, and the work they do are all clues not only to their social rank but to their moral and spiritual condition. Together they create a microcosm of late medieval English society. What distinguishes

Chaucer's prologue from more conventional estates satire, such as the *Prologue to Piers Plowman*, is its suppression of overt moral judgment. The narrator, in fact, seems to be expressing chiefly admiration and praise of the superlative skills and accomplishments of this particular group, even such dubious ones as the Friar's begging techniques or the Manciple's success in cheating the learned lawyers who employ him. Readers are left free to draw out the ironic implications of details presented with such apparent naivete. At the same time, they are invited into the easygoing atmosphere of "fellowship" that pervades Chaucer's prologue to the pilgrimage.

The General Prologue

When that April with his^o shoures soote^{o1}
The drought of March hath pierced to the roote,
And bathed every vein^o in such licour^o
Of which virtue^o engendered is the flower;
When Zephyrus^o eek^o with his sweete breath
5 Inspired hath in^o every holt^o and heath^o
The tender crops,^o and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve course yronne,²
And smale fowls^o maken melody
That sleepen all the night with open eye—
10 So pricketh them Nature in their corages^{o3}—
Then longen folk to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers⁴ for to seeken strange strondes^o
To ferne halwes,^o couthe^o in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires end
15 Of Engelond to Canterbury they wend,
The holy blissful^o martyr⁵ for to seeke^o
That them hath holpen^o when that they were seke.^o
Befell that in that season on a day,
In Southwark⁶ at the Tabard as I lay,
20 Ready to wenden^o on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with full devout courage,^o
At night was come into that hostelry
Well nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry^o folk, by aventure^o yfalle
25 In fellowship, and pilgrims were they alle
That toward Canterbury wolden^o ride.
The chambers and the stables weren wide,
And well we weren eased at the beste.^o
And shortly, when the sonne was to reste,^o
30 So had I spoken with them every one
That I was of their fellowship anon,

And made forward^o early for to rise,
 To take our way thereas I you devise.^o
 But nonetheless, while I have time and space,^o
 35 Er^o that I further in this tale pace,^o
 Me thinketh it accordant to reason^o
 To tell you all the condition
 Of each of them, so as it seemed me,^o
 And which they were, and of what degree,^o
 40 And eek^o in what array^o that they were in;
 And at a knight then will I first begin.
 A Knight there was, and that a worthy man,
 That from the time that he first began
 To riden out, he loved chivalry,
 45 Trouth^o and honor, freedom^o and courtesy.
 Full worthy was he in his lordes war,⁷
 And thereto had he riden, no man ferre,^o
 As well in Cristendom as heathenesse,^o
 And ever honored for his worthinesse.
 50 At Alisandre^{o8} he was when it was won;
 Full ofte time he had the board begun^o
 Aboven alle nations in Puce;^o
 In Lettow^o had he reised,^o and in Ruce,^o
 No Christian man so oft of his degree;
 55 In Gernade^o at the siege eek^o had he be^o
 Of Algezir,^o and riden in Belmarie;^o
 At Lyeis^o was he, and at Satalie,^o
 When they were won; and in the Grete Sea^o
 At many a noble armee^o had he be.
 60 At mortal battles had he been fifteen,
 And foughten for our faith at Tramisseen^o
 In listes^o thrice, and ay^o slain his foe.
 This ilke^o worthy knight had been also
 Sometime with the lord of Palatye^o
 65 Against another heathen in Turkey;
 And evermore he had a sovereign pris.^o

And though that he were worthy, he was wise,
 And of his port^o as meek as is a maid.
 He never yet no villainy^o ne said
 70 In all his life unto no manner wight:^o
 He was a very,^o perfect,^o gentle^o knight.
 But for to tellen you of his array,^o
 His hors^o were good, but he was not gay.^o
 Of fustian^o he wered a gipoun^o
 75 All bismotered with his haubergeoun,^o
 For he was late^o ycome from his voyage.
 And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.
 With him there was his son, a yonge Squier,
 A lover and a lusty bachelor,⁹
 80 With lockes crulle as they were laid in presse.¹
 Of twenty year of age he was, I gesse.
 Of his stature he was of evene lengthe,^o
 And wonderly deliver,^o and of great strengthe.
 And he had been sometime in chivachye^o
 85 In Flandres, in Artois, and Picardy,²
 And born him well as of so little space,^o
 In hope to stonden in his lady^o grace.
 Embrouded^o was he as it were a mede,^o
 All full of freshe flowers, white and rede;
 90 Singing he was, or fluting, all the day:
 He was as fresh as is the month of May.
 Short was his gown, with sleeves long and wide.
 Well could he sit on hors, and faire ride;
 He could songes make, and well endite,^o
 95 Joust and eek^o dance, and well portray^o and write.
 So hot^o he loved that by nightertale^o
 He slept no more than dooth a nightingale.
 Courteous he was, lowly,^o and servisable,^o
 And carf^o before his father at the table.
 100 A Yeoman³ had he and servants namo^o
 At that time, for him liste^o ride so;

And he^o was clad in coat and hood of greene.
 A sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keene,
 Under his belt he bore full thriftily;^o
 105 Well could he dress his tackle^o yeomanly:
 His arrows drooped not with fetheres lowe.
 And in his hand he bore a mighty bowe.
 A nut-head^o had he with a brown^o visage.
 Of woodcraft well could^o he all the usage.
 110 Upon his arm he bore a gay bracer,^o
 And by his side a sword and a buckler,^o
 And on that other side a gay dagger,
 Harnessed^o well and sharp as point of spere;
 A Christopher⁴ on his breast of silver sheene;^o
 115 An horn he bore, the baldrick^o was of greene.
 A forester was he soothly, as I gesse.
 There was also a Nun, a Prioress,⁵
 That of her smiling was full simple and coy.^o
 120 Her greatest oath was but by Saint Loy!⁶
 And she was cleped^o Madame Eglentine.
 Full well she sang the service divine,
 Entuned^o in her nose full semely;^o
 And French she spoke full fair and fetisly,^o
 125 After the school of Stratford at the Bowe⁷—
 For French of Paris was to her unknowe.
 At mete^o well ytaught^o was she withalle:^o
 She let no morsel from her lippes falle
 Ne wet her fingers in her sauce deepe;
 130 Well could she carye a morsel, and well keepe^o
 That no drop ne fell upon her breast.
 In courtesy was set full muchel her lest.⁸
 Her over-lippe wiped she so clene
 That in her cup was no farthing^o seene
 Of grease, when she dronken had her draughte;^o
 135 Full semely after her mete she raughte.^o
 And sikerly^o she was of great disport,^o

And full pleasant, and amiable of port,^o
 And pained her to countrefete cheere^o
 Of court, and to been estatlich^o of manere,
 140 And to been holden digne^o of reverence.
 But, for to speken of her conscience,
 She was so charitable and so pitous
 She wolde weepe if that she sawe a mous
 Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bledde.
 145 Of smalle houndes had she that she fedde
 With roasted flesh, or milk and wastelbreed;^o
 But sore wept she if one of them were deed,^o
 Or if men smote it with a yarde^o smerte;^o
 And all was conscience and tender herte.
 150 Full semely^o her wimple pinched^o was,
 Her nose tretis,^o her eyen^o gray as glass,
 Her mouth full small and thereto softe and reed^o—
 But sikerly she had a fair forehead:
 It was almost a spanne^o broad, I trowe,^o
 155 For hardily,^o she was not undergrowe.^o
 Full fetis^o was her cloak, as I was war;
 Of small^o coral about her arm she bar
 A pair of beads, gauded all with greene,⁹
 And thereon hung a brooch of gold full sheene^o
 160 On which there was first written a crowned A,
 And after, *Amor vincit omnia.*^o
 Another Nun with her hadde she
 That was her chaplain, and priestes three.
 A Monk there was, a fair for the maistry,^o
 165 An outrider¹ that loved venerye,^o
 A manly man, to been an abbot able.
 Full many a dainty hors had he in stable,
 And when he rode, men might his bridle heere
 Gingen^o in a whistling wind as cleere
 170 And eek^o as loud as doth the chapel belle
 Thereas^o this lord was keeper of the celle.²

The rule of Saint Maure or of Saint Beneit,³
 Because that it was old and somdel strait^o—
 This ilke^o Monk let olde thinges pace,^o
 175 And held after the newe world the space.^o
 He yaf not of that text a pulled hen⁴
 That saith that hunters been not holy men,
 Ne that a monk, when he is recchelees,^o
 Is likened till^o a fish that is waterlees—
 180 This is to say, a monk out of his cloister;
 But thilke text held^o he not worth an oyster.
 And I said his opinion was good:
 What^o should he study and make himselven wood^o
 Upon a book in cloister always to poure,
 185 Or swinke^o with his handes and laboure,
 As Austin⁵ bit?^o How shall the world be served?
 Let Austin have his swink to him reserved!
 Therefore he was a prikasour^o aright.
 Grey houndes he had as swift as fowl in flight.
 190 Of pricking^o and of hunting for the hare
 Was all his lust,^o for no cost would he spare.
 I saw his sleeves purfiled^o at the hand
 With gris,^o and that the finest of a land;
 And for to fasten his hood under his chin
 195 He had of gold ywroght a curious^o pin:
 A love-knot in the greater end there was.
 His head was bald, that shone as any glass,
 And eek^o his face, as^o he had been anoint:^o
 He was a lord full fat and in good point;^o
 200 His eyen steep,^o and rolling in his heed,
 That steamed as a furnace of a leed;^o
 His bootes supple, his horse in great estate^o—
 Now certainly he was a fair prelate.^o
 He was not pale as a forpined goost:^o
 205 A fat swan loved he best of any roast.
 His palfrey^o was as brown as is a berry.

A Frere there was, a wanton and a merry,
 A limitour,⁶ a full solempne man.
 In alle the orders four⁷ is none that can^o
 210 So much of daliaunce^o and fair langage:
 He hadde made full many a marriage
 Of younge wommen at his owene cost;
 Unto his order he was a noble post.^o
 Full well beloved and familiar was he
 215 With frankelins^o over all in his countree,
 And with worthy wommen of the town—
 For he had power of confessioun,
 As said himself, more than a curate,^o
 For of^o his order he was licenciate.^o
 220 Full sweetely heard he confession,
 And pleasant was his absolution.
 He was an easy man to give penance
 Thereas he wiste to have^o a good pitance;^o
 For unto a poore ordre for to give
 225 Is signe that a man is well yshrive;^o
 For if he gave, he dorste make avant^o
 He wiste that a man was repentant;⁸
 For many a man so hard is of his heart
 He may not weepe though him soore smerte:^o
 230 Therefore, in stead of weeping and prayeres,
 Men moote^o give silver to the poore freres.
 His tippet^o was ay^o farsed^o full of knives
 And pinnes, for to given faire wives;
 And certainly he had a merry note.
 235 Well could he sing and playen on a rote;^o
 Of yeddinges^o he bar outrely^o the pris.⁹
 His necke whit was as the flour-de-lis;^o
 Thereto he strong was as a champion.^o
 He knew the taverns well in every town,
 240 And every hostiler^o and tappestere,^o
 Bet^o than a lazar^o or a beggestere.^o

For unto such a worthy man as he
 Accorded not, as by his facultee,
 To have with sike^o lazars acquaintance:
 245 It is not honest,^o it may not avance,^{o1}
 For to dealen with no such poraile,^o
 But all with rich, and sellers of vitaile;^o
 And overall,^o thereas profit should arise,
 Courteous he was and lowly of service.
 250 There was no man nowhere so virtuous:
 He was the beste beggar in his house—
 And gave a certain ferme for the graunt;²
 252a None of his bretheren came there in his haunt.^o
 252b For though a widow hadde not a shoe,
 So pleasant was his *In principio*³
 Yet would he have a farthing^o er he wente;
 255 His purchase^o was well better than his rente.^o
 And rage he could as it were right a whelpe;^o
 In love-dayes⁴ ther could he muchel^o helpe,
 For there he was not like a cloisterer,^o
 With threadbare cope, as is a poor scholar,
 260 But he was like a master^o or a pope.
 Of double worstede^o was his semicope,^o
 And rounded as a bell out of the presse.^o
 Somewhat he lipped^o for his wantonesse^o
 To make his English sweet upon his tounge;
 265 And in his harping, when that he had songe,
 His eyen twinkled in his head aright
 As doon the sterres^o in the frosty night.
 This worthy limitour was cleped Huberd.
 A Merchant⁵ was there with a forked beard,
 270 In motely,^o and high on horse he sat,
 Upon his head a Flandrissh bever^o hat,
 His bootes clasped fair and fetisly.^o
 His reasons^o he spoke full solemnly,
 Sowninge^o always th'increase of his winning.^o

275 He would the sea were kept for anything^o
Betwixen Middelburgh and Orewelle.⁶
Well could he in exchange sheeldes selle.⁷
This worthy man full well his wit beset:^o
280 There wiste^o no wight^o that he was in debt,
So estatly^o was he of his governance,^o
With his bargains,^o and with his
chevissaunce.^o
Forsooth^o he was a worthy man withalle;
But, sooth to sayn, I noot^o how men him calle.
A Clerk there was of Oxenforde also
285 That unto logic hadde long ygo.^o
As lean was his horse as is a rake,
And he was not right fat, I undertake,
But looked hollow, and thereto soberly.
Full threadbare was his overest courtepy,^o
290 For he had gotten him yet no benefice,
Ne was so worldly for to have office.⁸
For him was lever^o have at his beddes head
Twenty bookes, clad in black or red,
Of Aristotle and his philosophy,
295 Than robes rich, or fithel,^o or gay sautry.^o
But all be that he was a philosopher⁹
Yet had he but little gold in coffer;
But all that he might of his frendes hente,^o
On bookes and on learning he it spente,
300 And busily gan for the soules praye
Of them that gave him wherewith to scoleye.^o
Of study took he most cure^o and most heede.
Not one word spoke he more than was neede,
And that was said in form^o and reverence,
305 And short and quick, and full of high sentence:^o
Sowninge in^o moral virtue was his speech,
And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.
A Sergeant of the Lawe,¹ war^o and wise,

310 That often hadde been at the Parvise²
 There was also, full rich of excellence.
 Discreet he was, and of great reverence—
 He seemed such, his wordes were so wise.
 Justice he was full often in assise^o
 By patent^o and by plein^o commission.
 315 For his science^o and for his high renown
 Of fees and robes had he many one.
 So great a purchasour^o was nowhere none;
 All was fee simple to him in effect³—
 His purchasing ne might not been infect.^o
 320 Nowhere so busy a man as he there nas;^o
 And yet he seemed busier than he was.
 In termes^o had he case^o and doomes^o
 alle
 That from the time of King William⁴ were falle.
 Thereto he could endite^o and make a
 325 thing,^o
 There could no wight pinche^o at his writing;
 And every statute coulde^o he plein^o by rote.^o
 He rode but homely^o in a medley^o coat,
 Girt with a ceint^o of silk, with barres^o smale.
 Of his array tell I no longer tale.
 330 A Frankelin⁵ was in his company:
 White was his beard as is the dayesy;^o
 Of his complexion he was sanguine.⁶
 Well loved he by the morrow^o a sop
 in wine.^o
 To liven in delight was ever his wone.^o
 335 For he was Epicurus'⁷ owne sone,
 That held opinion that plein^o delit
 Was verray felicity parfit.^o
 An householder and that a great was he:
 Saint Julian⁸ he was in his country.
 340 His bread, his ale, was always after one;^o

A better envined^o man was never none.
 Withouten bake mete^o was never his house,
 Of fish and flesh, and that so plenteous
 It snowed in his house of mete and drinke,
 345 Of alle dainties^o that men could thinke.
 After^o the sundry seasons of the year
 So changed he his mete^o and his supper.
 Full many a fat partridge had he in mewe,^o
 And many a bream, and many a luce^o in stewe.^o
 350 Woe was his cook but if^o his sauce were
 Poignant and sharp, and ready all his gear.^o
 His table dormant in his hall alway
 Stood ready covered all the longe day.⁹
 At sessions there was he lord and sire.
 355 Full ofte time he was Knight of the Shire.^o
 An anlaas^o and a gipser^o all of silk
 Hung at his girdle,^o white as morne^o milk.
 A sheriff had he been, and a countour.^{o1}
 Was nowhere such a worthy vavasour.^o
 360 An Haberdassher^o and a Carpenter,
 A Webb,^o a Dyer, and a Tapicer^o—
 And they were clothed alle in one livery
 Of a solemn and a great fraternity.²
 Full fresh and new their geare apiked^o was;
 365 Their knives were ychaped^o not with brass,
 But all with silver—wrought full clean and well
 Their girdles and their pouches everydel.^o
 Well seemed each of them a fair burgess^o
 To sitten in a guildhall on a dais.
 370 Everich,^o for the wisdom that he can,^o
 Was shapely^o for to be an alderman.^o
 For catel^o hadde they enough and rente,^o
 And eek their wives would it well assente^o—
 And elles^o certain were they to blame:
 375 It is full fair to been ycleped “Madame,”

And go to vigilies³ all before,^o
 And have a mantle royally ybore.^o
 A Cook they had with them, for the nonce,^o
 To boil the chickens with the marrow bones,
 380 And powder-marchant tart^o and galingale.^o
 Well could he know a draught of London ale.
 He coulde roast, and seeth,^o and broil, and fry,
 Maken mortreux,^o and well bake a pie.
 But great harm was it, as it thoughte me,
 385 That on his shin a mormal^o hadde he.
 For blancmange,^o that made he with the best.
 A Shipman⁴ was there, woning^o far by west—
 For ought I woot, he was of Dartemouthe.^o
 He rode upon a rouncey^o as he couthe,^o
 390 In a gown of falding^o to the knee.
 A dagger hanging on a laas^o had he
 About his neck, under his arm adown.
 The hot summer had made his hue all brown;
 And certainly he was a good felawe.
 395 Full many a draughte of wine had he drawe
 From Bordeauxward, while that the chapman sleep:⁵
 Of nice conscience^o took he no keep;^o
 If that he fought and had the higher hand,
 By water he sente them home^o to every land.
 400 But of his craft, to reckon well his tides,
 His stremes^o and his dangers^o him besides,
 His harbor and his mone,^o his lodemenage,^o
 There was none such from Hulle to Carthage.⁶
 Hardy he was and wise to undertake;^o
 405 With many a tempest had his beard been shake;
 He knew well all the havens^o as they were
 From Gotland to the Cape of Finistere,⁷
 And every crike^o in Britain^o and in Spain.
 His barge ycleped^o was the Magdalene.⁸
 410 With us there was a Doctor of Physic:^{o9}

In all this world ne was there none him like
 To speak of physic and of surgery.
 For he was grounded in astronomy,^o
 He kept his patient a full great deal
 415 In hours by his magic natural.¹
 Well could he^o fortunen the ascendant
 Of his images² for his patient.
 He knew the cause of every malady,
 Were it of hot or cold or moist or dry,
 420 And where engendered and of what humor:³
 He was a very,^o perfect practisour.^o
 The cause yknowe,^o and of his^o harm the root,
 Anon he gave the sike man his boot.^o
 Full ready had he his apothecaries
 425 To send him drugges and his letuaries,^o
 For each of them made other for to winne:^o
 Their friendship was not newe to beginne.
 Well knew he the old Esculapius,
 And Deiscorides and eek Rufus,
 430 Old Ipocras, Hali, and Galien,
 Serapion, Razis, and Avicen,
 Averrois, Damascien, and Constantin,
 Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertin.⁴
 Of his diet mesurable^o was he,
 435 For it was of no superfluity,
 But of great norishing^o and digestible.
 His study was but little on the Bible.
 In sanguine^o and in perse^o he clad was al,
 Lined with taffeta and with sendal;^o
 440 And yet he was but easy of dispense;^o
 He kepte that^o he won in pestilence.^o
 For^o gold in physic is a cordial,^o
 Therefore he loved gold in special.
 A good Wife was there of beside^o Bath,
 445 But she was somdel^o deaf, and that was scathe.^o

Of cloth-making she had such an haunt,^o
 She passed^o them of Ypres and of Gaunt.^o
 In all the parish wife ne was there none
 That to the offring^o before her shoulde gone,
 450 And if there did, certain so wroth was she
 That she was out of all charity.
 Her coverchiefs full fine were of ground^o—
 I dorste^o swear they weyeden^o ten pound
 That on a Sunday weren upon her head.
 455 Her hosen^o weren of fine scarlet reed,^o
 Full strait yteyd,^o and shoes full moist^o and newe.
 Bold was her face and fair and red of hewe.^o
 She was a worthy woman all her life:
 460 Husbands at churche door she hadde five,⁵
 Withouten^o other company in youthe—
 But theerof needeth not^o to speak as nouthe.^o
 And thrice had she been at Jerusalem;
 She had passed many a strange stream;^o
 At Rome she hadde been, and at Boulogne,
 465 In Galice at Saint Jame, and at Coloigne:⁶
 She could muchel of^o wandering by the waye.
 Gap-toothed was she, soothly for to saye.^o
 Upon an ambler^o easily she sat,
 Ywimpled^o well, and on her head an hat
 470 As brood as is a buckler or a targe,⁷
 A foot-mantle^o about her hippes large,
 And on her feet a pair of spures^o sharpe.
 In fellowship well could she laugh and carpe^o
 Of remedies of love she knew parchaunce,^o
 475 For she could^o of that art the olde dance.
 A good man was there of religion,
 And was a poore Parson of a town,
 But rich he was of holy thought and work.
 He was also a learned man, a clerk,
 480 That Cristes gospel trewely would^o preach;

His parisshens^o devoutly would he teach.
Benign he was, and wonder^o diligent,
And in adversity full patient,
And such he was ypreved^o ofte sithes.^o
485 Full loath were him to cursen for his tithes,⁸
But rather would he give, out of doubt,
Unto his poore parisshens about
Of his offring and eek of his substance:^o
He could in little thing have suffisance.^o
490 Wide was his parish, and houses far asunder,
But he ne lefte not^o for rain ne thunder,
In sickness nor in mischief, to visite
The ferreste^o in his parish, much and lite,^o
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staff.
495 This noble example to his sheep he yaf^o
That first he wrought, and afterward he taught.⁹
Out of the Gospel he tho^o wordes caught,
And this figure^o he added eek^o thereto:
That if gold rust, what shall iron do?
500 For if a priest be foul, on whom we truste,
No wonder is a lewed^o man to ruste.^o
And shame it is, if a priest take keep,^o
A shiten^o shepherd and a clene sheep.
Well ought a priest example for to give
505 By his cleanness how that his sheep should live.
He sette not his benefice¹ to hire
And let^o his sheep encumbered in the mire
And ran to London, unto Saint Paules,
To seeken him a chauntrye^o for soules,²
510 Or with a brotherhood to been withholde,³
But dwelt at home and kepte well his folde
So that the wolf ne made it not miscarry:^o
He was a shepherd and not a mercenary.
And though he holy were and virtuous,
515 He was to sinful men not despitous,^o

Ne of his speeche dangerous ne digne,^o
 But in his teaching discreet and benigne.
 To drawen folk to heaven by fairnesse,^o
 By good example—this was his busynesse.^o
 520 But^o it were any persone obstinat,^o
 Whatso he were, of high or low estat,
 Him would he snibben^o sharply for the nonce^o
 A better priest I trowe^o there nowhere none is.
 He waited after^o no pomp and reverence,
 525 Ne maked^o him a spiced^o conscience,
 But Cristes lore^o and his Apostles twelve
 He taught, but first he followed it himselve.
 With him there was a Plowman, was his brother,
 That had ylad^o of dung full many a fother.^o
 530 A true swinker^o and a good was he,
 Living in peace and perfect charity.
 God loved he best with all his whole heart
 At alle times, though him gamed or smart,^o
 And then his neighebor right as himselve.⁴
 535 He wolde thressh, and thereto dike^o and delve,^o
 For Cristes sake, for every poore wight,^o
 Withouten hire,^o if it lay in his might.^o
 His tithes payed he full faire and well,
 Both of his proper swink and his catel.⁵
 540 In a tabard^o he rode upon a mare.
 There was also a Reeve and a Millere,
 A Somnour,^o and a Pardoner also,
 A Manciple,^o and myself—there were namo.^o
 545 The Miller was a stout carl^o for the nonce.
 Ful big he was of brawn^o and eek^o of bones—
 That preved^o well, for overall there^o he cam
 At wrestling he would have always the ram.⁶
 He was short-shouldered, broad, a thicke knarre.^o
 550 There was no door that he nolde heave off harre,^o
 Or break it at a running with his head.

His beard as any sow or fox was red,
 And thereto broad, as though it were a spade;
 Upon the cop^o right of his nose he hade
 A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,
 555 Red as the bristles of a sowes ears;
 His nosehirles^o blake were and wide.
 A sword and a buckler^o bore he by his side.
 His mouth as great was as a great furnace.
 He was a jangler^o and a goliardais,^o
 560 And that was most of sin and harlotries.^o
 Well could he stelen corn and tollen thries⁷—
 And yet he had a thumb of gold, pardee.⁸
 A white coat and a blue hood wered he.
 A bagpipe well could he blow and sounē,
 565 And therewithal he brought us out of town.
 A gentil Manciple⁹ was there of a temple,
 Of which achatours^o might take example
 For to been wise in buying of vitaile;^o
 For whether that he paid or took by taile,^o
 570 Algate^o he waited^o so in his achat^o
 That he was ay biforn^o and in good stat.^o
 Now is not that of God a full fair grace
 That such a lewed^o mannes wit shall pace^o
 The wisdom of an heap of learned men?
 575 Of masters had he more than thrice ten
 That weren of law expert and curious,^o
 Of which there were a dozen in that house
 Worthy to been stewards of rent^o and land
 Of any lord that is in Engeland,
 580 To make him live by his propre good^o
 In honor debtless but^o if he were wood,^o
 Or live as scarcely^o as him list desire,^o
 And able for to helpen all a shire
 In any cas^o that mighte fall^o or hap;^o
 585 And yet this Manciple set their aller cap!^o

The Reeve was a slender, choleric¹ man;
 His beard was shave as neigh^o as ever he can;
 His hair was by his ears round yshorn;
 His top was docked^o like a priest biforn;²
 590 Full longe were his legges and full lean—
 Ylike a staff, there was no calf yseen.^o
 Well could he keep a gerner^o and a bin^o—
 There was none auditor could on him win.^o
 Well wiste^o he by the drought and by the rain
 595 The yielding of his seed and of his grain.
 His lordes sheep, his neet,^o his dayery,^o
 His swine, his horse, his stoor,^o and his poultry
 Was wholly in this Reeves governing,
 And by his covenant^o gave the reckoning
 600 Since that his lord was twenty year of age.
 There could no man bring him in arrerage.^o
 There nas baillif, herde,^o nor other hine,^o
 That he ne knew his sleight^o and his covine^o—
 They were adrad^o of him as of the death.
 605 His woning^o was full fair upon an heath;^o
 With greene trees shadowed was his place.
 He coude better than his lord purchase.
 Full rich^o he was astored privily.^o
 His lord well could he plesen subtilly,
 610 To give and lene^o him of his^o owene good,^o
 And have a thank,^o and yet^o a coat and hood.
 In youth he had learned a good mister:^o
 He was a well good wright, a carpenter.
 This Reeve sat upon a full good stot^o
 615 That was a pomely^o grey and highte^o Scot.
 A long surcoat^o of perse^o upon he had,
 And by his side he bore a rusty blade.
 Of Norfolk was this Reeve of which I telle,
 Beside a town men clepen^o Baldeswelle.^o
 620 Tukked he was as is a friar aboute,³

And ever he rode the hinderest^o of our route.^o
 A Somnour⁴ was there with us in that place
 That had a fire-red cherubines^o face,⁵
 For saucefleem^o he was, with eyen narrow.
 625 And hot he was, and lecherous as a sparrow.
 With scaled^o brows black and piled^o beard:
 Of his visage children were afeared.
 There nas quicksilver, litarge,^o ne brimstone,^o
 Boras,^o ceruce,^o ne oil of tartar none,
 630 Ne ointement that woulde cleanse and bite,^o
 That him might helpen of his whelkes^o white,
 Nor of the knobs^o sitting on his cheeks.
 Well loved he garlic, onions, and eek^o leeks
 And for to drink strong wine red as blood.
 635 Then would he speak and cry as^o he were wood;^o
 As when that he well drunken had the wine,
 Then would he speke no word but Latin:
 A fewe terms had he, two or three,
 That he had learned out of some decree;
 640 No wonder is—he heard it all the day,
 And eek ye knowe well how that a jay
 Can clepen "Watte"^o as well as can the Pope—
 But whoso could in other thing him grope,^o
 Then had he spent all his philosophy;^o
 645 Ay^o *Questio quid juris*⁶ would he cry.
 He was a gentle harlot^o and a kind;
 A better fellow shoulde men not find:
 He would suffer,^o for a quart of wine,
 A good fellow to have his concubine
 650 A twelvemonth, and excusen him at the full;^o
 Full privily a finch eek could he pull.⁷
 And if he found owher^o a good felawe
 He woulde techen him to have noon awe
 In such case of the archdeacon's curse,^o
 655 But if^o a mannes soul were in his purse,

For in his purse he should ypunisshed be.
 "Purse is the Archedeacon's helle," said he.
 But well I woot^o he lied right in deed:
 Of cursing^o ought each guilty man him dread
 660 For curse will slay right as assoiling^o saveth—
 And also war him^o of a *significavit*.⁸
 In danger^o had he at his owene gise^o
 The younge girls^o of the diocese,
 And knew their conseil,^o and was all their reed.^o
 665 A garland had he set upon his head
 As great as it were for an ale-stake;⁹
 A buckeler^o had he made him of a cake.^o
 With him there rode a gentle Pardoner¹
 Of Rouncival,² his friend and his compeer,^o
 670 That straight was comen from the Court of Rome.³
 Full loud he sung, "Come hither, love, to me."
 This Somnour bore^o to him a stiff
 burdoun:^o
 Was never trump^o of half so great a soun.
 This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
 675 But smooth it hung as doth a strike^o of flax;
 By ounces^o hung his lockes that he had,
 And therewith he his shoulders oversprad,
 But thin it lay, by colpons,^o one by one;
 But hood for jollity^o wore he none,
 680 For it was trussed up in his wallet:^o
 Him thought^o he rode all of the newe jet.^o
 Dischevele^o save his cap he rode all bare.
 Such glaring eyen had he as an hare.
 A vernicle had he sewn upon his cap,⁴
 685 His wallet before him in his lap,
 Bretful^o of pardon, comen from Rome all hot.
 A voice he had as small as hath a goat;
 No beard had he, ne never should^o have;
 As smooth it was as it were late yshave:^o

690 I trowe^o he were a gelding or a mare.⁵
But of his craft, from Berwick into Ware,⁶
Ne was there such another pardoner;
For in his male^o he had a pillow-beer^o
Which that he said was Our Lady veil;
695 He said he had a gobbet^o of the sail
That Sainte Peter had when that he wente
Upon the sea, till Jesu Christ him hente.^o
He had a cross of laton,^o full of stones,
And in a glass he had pigges bones,
700 But with these relics when that he found
A poor parson dwelling upon lond,
Upon a day he got him more money
Than that the parson got in monthes tweye;
And thus with feigned^o flattery and japes^o
705 He made the parson and the people his apes.⁷
But truly to tellen at the last,
He was in church a noble ecclesiast;
Well could he read a lesson and a story,^o
But altherbest^o he sang an offertory;
710 For well he wiste,^o when that song was sung,
He must preach and well affile^o his tongue
To win silver, as he full well could—
Therefore he sung the merrierly^o and loud.
Now have I told you soothly in a clause^o
715 Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek^o the cause
Why that assembled was this company
In Southwark at this gentle hostelry
That hight the Tabard, faste by^o the Bell.^o
But now is time to you for to tell
720 How that we baren us^o that ilke^o night
When we were in that hostelry alight;^o
And after will I tell of our voyage
And all the remnant of our pilgrimage.
But first I pray you of your courtesy
725

That ye n'arete^o it not my villainy^o
 Though that I plainly speak in this matere
 To telle you their wordes and their cheere,^o
 Nor though I speak their wordes proprely;^o
 For this ye knowen also well as I:
 730 Whoso shall tell a tale after a man
 He moot rehearse,^o as nigh as ever he can,
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,^o
 All^o speak he never so rudeliche and large,^o
 Or else he moot^o tell his tale untrewe,^o
 735 Or feine^o thing, or finde wordes newe.
 He may not spare^o although he were his brother;
 He moot as well say oo^o word as another.
 Christ spak^o himself full broad^o in Holy Writ,
 And well ye woot^o no villainy is it;
 740 Eek^o Plato saith, whoso can him read,
 The words mote^o be cousin to the deed.⁸
 Also I pray you to forgive it me
 All^o have I not set folk in their degree^o
 Here in this tale as that they shoulde stande:
 745 My wit is short, ye may well understande.
 Great cheer made our Host us everichon,^o
 And to the supper set he us anon.
 He served us with vitaille^o at the beste.^o
 Strong was the wine, and well to drinke us leste.^o
 750 A seemly^o man our Hoste was withal
 For to been a marshal^o in an hall;
 A large man he was, with eyen steepe;^o
 A fairer burgess^o was there none in Chepe⁹—
 Bold of his speech, and wise, and well ytaught,
 755 And of manhood him lakkede right naught.
 Eek thereto he was right a merry man,
 And after supper playen he began,
 And spak of mirthe amonges othere thinges—
 760 When that we had made our reckonings

And saide thus, "Now, lordings, truely,
 Ye been to me right welcome, heartily.
 For by my truth, if that I shall not lie,
 I saw not this year so merry a company
 At once in this herberwe^o as is now.
 765 Fain^o would I do you mirthe, wist I how.^o
 And of a mirth I am right now bethought,
 To do you ease, and it shall coste nought.
 Ye go to Canterbury—God you speede;
 The blissful martyr quite^o you your meede.^o
 770 And well I woot^o as ye go by the way
 Ye shapen you^o to talen^o and to play,
 For truwely, comfort ne mirth is none
 To ride by the waye dumb as stone;
 And therefore will I maken you disport
 775 As I said erst,^o and do you some comfort;
 And if you liketh^o all, by one assent,
 For to stonden at my judgement
 And for to worken^o as I shall you say,
 Tomorrow when ye riden by the way—
 780 Now, by my father soule that is dead,
 But^o ye be merry I will give you my head!
 Hold up your hands withouten more speche."
 Our conseil was not longe for to seeche;^o
 785 Us thoughte it was not worth to make it wise,¹
 And granted him withouten more avise^o
 And bade him say his verdict as him leste.^o
 "Lordings," quod^o he, "now herkneth for the beste,
 But taketh it not, I pray you, in disdain:^o
 790 This is the point, to speken short and plain,
 That each of you, to shorte with^o our waye
 In this voyage, shall tellen tales twaye^o
 To Canterburyward, I mean it so,
 And homeward he shall tellen othere two
 Of adventures^o that whilom^o have befall;
 795

And which of you that bereth him^o best of all—
 That is to say, that telleth in this cas
 Tales of best sentence^o and most solace^o—
 Shall have a supper at our aller cost,^o
 Here in this place, sitting by this post,
 800 When that we come again from Canterbury.
 And, for to make you the more merry,
 I will myself goodly^o with you ride—
 Right at my owene cost—and be your guide.
 And whoso will my judgement withsaye^o
 805 Shall pay all that we spende by the waye.
 And if ye vouchesauf^o that it be so,
 Tell me anon, withouten wordes mo,
 And I will early shape me^o therefore.”
 This thing was granted, and our oathes swore^o
 810 With full glad heart, and prayden^o him also
 That he would vouchesauf for to do so,
 And that he woulde been our governour,
 And of our tales judge and reportour,^o
 And set a supper at a certain pris,^o
 815 And we will ruled been at his devis^o
 In high and low; and thus by one assent
 We been accorded to his judgement.
 And thereupon the wine was fet^o anon;
 We dronken and to reste wente echon^o
 820 Withouten any longer tarrying.
 Amorrow, when that day began to spring,
 Up rose our Host and was our aller cok,^o
 And gathered us together in a flock,
 And forth we riden, a little more than pas,^o
 825 Unto the watering of Saint Thomas;²
 And there our Host began his horse arreste^o
 And saide, “Lordes, herkneth if you leste:^o
 Ye woot^o your forward^o and it you recorde:^o
 If evensong and morwesong^o accorde,^o
 830

Let see now who shall tell the firste tale.
 As ever mote^o I drinken wine or ale,
 Whoso be rebel to my judgement
 Shall pay for all that by the way is spent.
 Now draweth cut^o er^o that we ferrer twinne:^o
 835 He which that hath the shortest shall beginne.
 "Sire Knight," quod he, "my master and my lord,
 Now draweth cut, for that is my accord.^o
 Cometh near," quod he, "my lady Prioress,
 And ye, sir Clerk, let be your shamefastness,^o
 840 Ne studieth^o not. Lay hand to, every man!"
 Anon to drawen every wight^o began.
 And shortly for to tellen as it was,
 Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas,^o
 The soth^o is this, the cut fell to the Knight—
 845 Of which full blithe and glad was every wight—
 And tell he must his tale, as was resoun
 By forward^o and by composicioun,^o
 As ye han heard. What needeth wordes mo?^o
 And when this good man saw that it was so,
 850 As he that wise was and obedient
 To keep his forward by his free assent,
 He saide, "Since I shall begin the game,
 What, welcome be the cut, in Goddes name!
 Now let us ride, and harkneth what I say."
 855 And with that word we riden forth our way,
 And he began with right a merry cheer
 His tale anon, and said as ye may hear.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The classicizing spring opening of lines 1–10 shows the influence of one of the 14th century's most popular books, the Latin *History of the Destruction of Troy* of Guido delle Colonne

(ca. 1215–1290), completed ca. 1287. Chaucer also drew on it in *Troilus and Criseyde*.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Has run its half course in Aries (the Ram).—The first sign of the zodiac in the solar year.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: So Nature spurs (incites) them in their hearts.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Experienced pilgrims (traditionally, those who have visited the Holy Land).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: St. Thomas à Becket (ca. 1118–1170), murdered in Canterbury Cathedral.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A suburb of London south of the Thames. The Tabard was a real inn located there, and Harry Bailey—the one pilgrim other than Chaucer to be drawn by name from life—was its landlord.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:

Medieval knights were professionals, taking employment where it was available—serving their king, at times when a royal army was assembled, and their feudal overlord, who paid their service with grants of land. The phrase “his lordes war” may refer to either of these, and perhaps to crusading service in the name of God. In addition, professional knights would join teams for tournaments and participate in far-flung campaigns as mercenaries or irregulars. The abstractions that held all this together were *chivalry* and *courtesy* and the codes of conduct and honor they mandated.

[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8:

All the campaigns listed in lines 51–66 are historical. Alexandria fell in 1365; the Teutonic knights fought non-Christians in Prussia and Lithuania; Pope Urban declared a crusade against (Christian but Orthodox) Russia in 1378; Algeciras in Moorish Granada was besieged from 1342 to 1344; and there were forays into North Africa (Morocco) and tournaments there (Tramissene in Algeria). Peter of Cyprus took Lyeys (modern Ayas) in Armenia in 1367, and Satalye (Antalya) in Turkey in 1361, allying with the Emir of Palatye (Balat) in 1365. Most of

these engagements take place in “heathenesse,” that is, heathen lands, but we are told in the same line (49) that the Knight also fought “in Cristendom”—campaigns that are not listed, presumably taking place closer to home. The aim of the portrait is to paint as geographically broad a canvas as possible, across a time period (1342 to the 1380s) too great for the career of any one knight.

[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Bachelor as in Bachelor of Arts, below a Master. A squire was a trainee knight serving under a master (Chaucer was a squire at court in the 1360s, but did not advance). The Squire is young, smartly and fashionably dressed, and excels in the accomplishments expected of squires (including carving the meat). [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: With curly locks (of hair), as if they had been set in a curling press. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This expedition will have formed part of what we now call the Hundred Years’ War. Chaucer himself fought in Artois and Picardy in 1369. The most recent in time to *The General Prologue* was an expedition across France from Flanders through Artois and Picardy, led by the king’s youngest uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, in 1380. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A foot soldier or former soldier (as here) serving as a household official and also working as forester in the (royal) forests. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An image of St. Christopher, the legendary patron saint of travelers. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A prioress was the head of a convent of nuns—itsself a socially prestigious position that was sometimes conferred on the basis of noble birth. Chaucer’s Prioress behaves as if she were a great lady and is described in part as if she were a heroine of romance with corresponding social accomplishments. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Eloi, the French name of St. Eligius (ca. 590–660), the patron saint of goldsmiths and all metalworkers. The detail here anticipates the brooch (lines 160–62). [Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: According to the manner (school) of Stratford at the Bowe (a London suburb where a convent was located). The joke gently suggests that the Prioress's version of Anglo-Norman, "the French of England," sounded very English, and so undercut her social pretensions.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Her chief delight was in courtesy (good manners). While courtesy is idealized in romance as having to do with interior qualities, table manners play their part—prominently so in the Benedictine Rule, from which secular ideas of courtesy in part derive. Yet Chaucer's portrait throughout stresses social form over spiritual substance.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A rosary, with green beads to mark certain prayers.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A monk charged with supervising property distant from the monastery. The portrait puns on "venerye" (hunting) and "priking" (riding, line 191), words perfectly applicable to their ostensible subject, hunting, while—together with the "love-knot" of line 197—perhaps hinting at other forms of extramural activity for a "manly man."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Keeper of an outlying cell of the monastery.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The Italian monk St. Benedict (ca. 480–547), considered the father of Western monasticism, was the author of the Benedictine Rule; his disciple St. Maurus (ca. 510–584) was credited with introducing it to France in 543.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: He didn't give a plucked hen for that text.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: St. Augustine (354–430), who wrote that monks should perform manual labor.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A friar in a convent of friars granted exclusive begging rights in a certain area.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The four orders of friars, in order of foundation, were Carmelites (ca. 1155), Franciscans (1209), Dominicans (ca. 1216), and Augustinians (1244).[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: For if someone made a gift, the Friar was able to boast that he knew that person to be penitent.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: He absolutely took the prize for ballads.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It was not suitable, in his position.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: And he paid a certain rent for the privilege of begging. Lines 252a and b are in Hengwrt but not Ellesmere and are excluded from the numeration of most editions, presumably on the grounds that Chaucer may have canceled them.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In the beginning (Latin).—The Friar's salutation (John 1:1).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Days appointed for settling lawsuits out of court.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Merchants were importers and exporters, primarily of wool, cloth, and (like Chaucer's father) wine.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Middelburgh in the Netherlands and Orwell in Suffolk were key ports in the wool trade across the North Sea.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, he could speculate profitably in foreign exchange ("sheeldes" are probably Flemish ecus).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The Clerk has not gained a living (benefice) as a parish priest nor sought secular employment, in government service or as secretary to a nobleman.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A student of philosophy, with a pun on the secondary sense of the word, "alchemist," one who turns lead into gold.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Sergeants of law were prestigious attorneys, with a monopoly on cases at the Court of Common Pleas.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Paradise, a meeting place for lawyers in St. Paul's Cathedral.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Owned outright without legal impediments.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: William the Conqueror (ca. 1028–1087; reigned 1066–87).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A franklin was a freeholder, a prominent member of the landed gentry.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A reference both to the blood-dominated temperament of the Franklin and to his red face. On the temperaments, see p. 484, n. 3.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Greek philosopher (341–270 B.C.E.) who emphasized happiness, which later became identified with sensual pleasure.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Julian the Hospitaller (4th c. C.E.), patron saint of hospitality.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Tables were usually disassembled when not in use, but the Franklin kept his mounted and set (covered), hence “dormant.”[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: He presided over court sessions (as justice of the peace). The word “countour” (line 359)—glossed here as assessor, or tax collector—may also have a legal meaning (“pleader in court”).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The fraternity to which all belong, and at which they wear the livery, must be a parish fraternity rather than one of the craft guilds (which were for single crafts). It is unclear whether these tradesmen are from London or from a country town.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: “Vigils” might be feasts held on the eve of saints’ days or funeral processions, which fraternity members attended in livery.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The distinction between sea captains and pirates was not always clear in Chaucer’s day, any more than in the time of Elizabeth I (Sir Francis Drake, for example, was both a royal servant and a privateer). Devon was a center for shipmen in both periods.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: On the way back from Bordeaux, while the Merchant slept.—Bordeaux was an English possession in Chaucer’s time and the main port for London’s trade in French wine.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Either Carthage (in modern Tunisia) or Cartagena (in Spain).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The “land’s end” (in Latin, *finis terrae*) of western Spain; Gotland is an island in the Baltic Sea.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: There is historical evidence of a ship called the *Maudelayne* with a Dartmouth connection in Chaucer’s lifetime, but the name (after Mary Magdalen, renowned for her penance and her mercy) may be an ironic contrast to the Shipman’s drowning of his prisoners (line 400) and lack of “nice conscience” (line 398).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Physician holds an advanced degree and is as eminent in his field as the Knight and the Sergeant of Law in theirs.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: He tended his patient closely at the hours dictated by his knowledge of astrology (“natural magic”).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *fortunen . . . images*: assign the propitious time, according to the position of the stars, for using talismanic images.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, wherever the disturbance of the four bodily humors that was thought to cause disease, whether in the melancholy humor, seated in the black bile (cold and dry, like earth); the sanguine, seated in the blood (hot and moist, like air); the choleric, seated in the yellow bile (hot and dry, like fire); or the phlegmatic, seated in the phlegm (cold and moist, like water).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Doctor is familiar with the treatises attributed in the Middle Ages to the great names of medical history: the purely legendary Greek demigod Asclepius; the Greeks Dioscorides, Rufus, Hippocrates, Galen, and Serapion; the Persians Hali and Rhazes; the Arabs Avicenna and Averroes; and the Christians John (?) of Damascus, Constantine the African, the Scotsman Bernard Gordon, and two Englishmen, John of Gaddesden and Gilbert, the former an earlier contemporary of Chaucer.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: The civil ceremony of marriage, exchange of vows in front of witnesses, took place outside the church door in the Middle Ages.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Three sites of shrines much visited by pilgrims: Notre Dame Cathedral in Boulogne, France; St. James of Compostela in Galicia, Spain; and the cathedral in Cologne, Germany.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Two types of small shield.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: He would be most reluctant to invoke excommunication in order to collect his tithes.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, he practiced what he preached. See Matthew 5:19.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, his parish: a priest might rent his parish to another (a placeholder, or vicar) and take a more profitable position.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: St. Paul's in London had many chantries, or foundations that employed priests for the sole duty of saying masses for the souls of certain persons.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Or to be employed by a brotherhood; that is, to take a lucrative and fairly easy position with a parish guild.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: And then (he loved) his neighbor exactly as himself.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A plowman held a small allotment of land (his *catel*) in return for the service he gave others (his *proper swink*).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A ram was frequently offered as a prize in wrestling matches.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Take toll thrice: deduct from the grain ("corn"), which has been brought to his mill for grinding, far more than the lawful percentage.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An ironic reference to the proverb that an honest miller has a golden thumb.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The steward of a college or, as here, one of the Inns of Court (a temple) at which English law was taught.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: That is, dominated by yellow bile. —A reeve was a manorial overseer and bursar.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Clergymen partially shaved their heads (with tonsure).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Having his clothing tucked up (over his girdle), like a friar.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A summoner: one who serves summonses on behalf of ecclesiastical courts and enforces their discipline.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, a face as seen at the Last Judgment, not in scenes of heavenly bliss.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Question: what point of the law (applies)? (Latin), a phrase frequently used in ecclesiastical courts.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: He knew how, in secret, to pull a trick. Sexual innuendo is possible but the phrase covers any kind of trickery.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: And also one should be careful of the writ that transferred the guilty offender from the ecclesiastical to the civil arm for punishment (called a “significavit,” from the first Latin word in the writ, “He has signified”).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A tavern was signaled by a pole projecting from its front wall, on which hung a garland.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A pardoner, who might be lay or cleric, was a seller of indulgences, remission of sins from the Church’s “treasury of grace.” In late medieval theology, particularly after the development in the late 12th century of the doctrine of purgatory as a formal place (rather than a state), the business is perfectly legitimate. But Chaucer’s Pardoner is a fraud.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An Augustinian house in Charing Cross, accused in 1379 of dealing in fraudulent indulgences, supposedly from the papal court (see lines 671, 687).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Chaucer’s portrait draws on anticlerical satire, particularly of friars, and the figure of Faux-Semblant (False

Seeming) in the *Romance of the Rose* (lines 10898–11950).[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: A portrait of Christ's face as it was impressed on the handkerchief of the legendary St. Veronica, who gave the handkerchief to him as he carried his cross to Golgotha. The miraculous portrait was often reproduced as a pilgrim's badge, a memento of pilgrimage to Rome.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Chaucer compares the Pardoner to a castrated horse (gelding) and a female horse (mare). Scholars have debated exactly what this implies about the Pardoner's sex and sexuality, but the remark clearly calls his masculinity into question. Nonetheless, later in the *Canterbury Tales* he refers to his anticipated marriage and claims to have a girl in every town.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, from one end of England to the other.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: He made monkeys of the parson and the people.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Chaucer's immediate source for this is Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3.pr.12.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Cheapside, the bourgeois center of London (where in fact the Host does not reside).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It did not seem to us worth making an issue of it.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A brook a little distance from London, on the Kent Road.[Return to reference 2](#)

Notes

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- °: *sweet showers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(of plants)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *liquid*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *power*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the west wind* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *also* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *breathed life into* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *grove* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *field* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *spirit, mood* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *various* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *wanted to* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accommodated in the best way* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *(we) made an agreement* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *further* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in Christian as well as heathen lands* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Alexandria* [Return to reference °](#)

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- °: *happen*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *made fools of them all*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *close*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cut short*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *visible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *granary* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(for grain)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *get the better of him*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knew*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cattle* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dairy herd*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stock*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *contract*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *arrears*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shepherd* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *worker*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *trickery* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *fraud*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dwelling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meadow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *richly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stocked secretly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lend* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the lord's)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *possessions*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *receive thanks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trade*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stallion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dappled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *topcoat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Bawdswell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hindmost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *group*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cherub's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pimplly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scabby* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *patchy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lead ointment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sulfur*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *borax* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *white lead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pustules*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lumps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call Walter (an arbitrary name)*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *examine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(learning)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble rascal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *allow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *completely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anywhere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sentence of excommunication*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excommunication*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *absolution*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *let him also beware*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in his control* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disposal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *youngsters*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secrets* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *adviser*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shield* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loaf of bread*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comrade*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong bass accompaniment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trumpet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hank*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(thin) strands*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clusters*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to seem attractive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pack*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it seemed to him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fashion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with hair down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brimful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recently shaved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *bag* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pillowcase* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *piece* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brass alloy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *false* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tricks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *liturgical narrative* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *best of all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharpen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sang more merrily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly in brief* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *close to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(another tavern)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *conducted ourselves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alighted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *impute* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boorishness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behavior* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accurately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must repeat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *responsibility* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broadly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inaccurately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *falsify* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spare anyone* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spoke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very frankly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for all that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rank*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to every one of us*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to the full*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleased us*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *master of ceremonies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prominent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *citizen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if I knew how*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intend* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell tales*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seek*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deliberation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as it pleased him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disdainfully*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in order to shorten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *events* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *performs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wisdom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the cost of us all*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *kindly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *contradict*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *get ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sworn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(we) prayed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recorder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *value*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fetches*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the cock of us all (woke us up)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a step*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *halt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it please you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recall*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *morning song (matins)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agree*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lots* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go further*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decision*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *modesty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think about it*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chance, or luck, or destiny*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pact* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °

[*The Knight's Tale* follows *The General Prologue*. It is a long romance, written in an elevated style. Chaucer is believed to have composed it prior to starting *The Canterbury Tales* and then made minor revisions to fit it to the tale-telling scheme. It is a suitable tale for the noble Knight: it is martial, decorous, morally serious, and in a high rhetorical register. *The Knight's Tale* tells the story of Arcite and Palamon, cousins who are taken prisoner at the siege and destruction of ancient Thebes by Theseus, the ruler of Athens. Gazing out from their prison cell, the Theban cousins fall in love at first sight, at almost the same moment, with Theseus's sister-in-law, Emily, who is taking an early morning walk in the garden below their window. After a bitter rivalry, the two cousins reconcile only when Arcite lies wounded on his deathbed. The tale reaches an apparently peaceful conclusion: despite winning the tournament for Emily's hand, Arcite dies, and Palamon and Emily mourn him and, eventually, marry. The tale is an ambitious combination of classical mythology, romance adventure, and philosophical treatment of the themes of fortune and destiny. It shares with the story told immediately after it, *The Miller's Tale*, the plot structure of a love triangle—and this similarity invites readers to notice the other very marked contrasts between the tales, in their style, genre, theme, and worldview.]

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

The Miller's Tale belongs to a genre known as the "fabliau" (plural, "fabliaux"): a brief comic narrative in verse, usually vulgar and often scatological or obscene. Fabliaux flourished in thirteenth-century France, and Chaucer was clearly intrigued by the possibilities of the genre, employing it not only for the *The Miller's Tale* but *The Reeve's Tale*, *Shipman's Tale*, and fragmentary *Cook's Tale*. Fabliaux tend to be set in the contemporary medieval present and to feature characters whose social roles are ordinary: craftsmen, priests, peasants, wives. The plots of fabliaux revolve around a central trick or ruse, often with sex or money at stake. These are the tales Chaucer is anticipating in *The General Prologue* when he warns his audience that they must expect some rude speaking (see lines 725–42). An even more pointed apology follows at the end of *The Miller's Prologue*.

By having Robin the Miller tell a fabliau to "quite" (to requite or pay back) the Knight's aristocratic romance, Chaucer sets up a fractious dialogue between classes, genres, and styles, which he exploits throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Miller's Prologue

When that the Knight had thus his tale ytold,
In all the route nas^o there young ne old
That he ne said it was a noble story,
And worthy for to drawen^o to memory,
And namely^o the gentles^o everichon.
5 Our Hoste laughed and swore, "So must I gon,^o
This goes aright: unbokeled is the male.^o
Let see now who shall tell another tale.
For trewely the game is well bigonne.
Now telleth you, sire Monk, if that you conne,^o
10 Somewhat to quite^o with the Knight's tale."
The Miller, that for drunken^o was all pale,
So that unnethe^o upon his horse he sat,
He nolde avalen^o neither hood ne hat,
Ne abiden^o no man for his curteisye,
15 But in Pilate's voice¹ he gan to crye,
And swore, "By armes^o and by blood and bones,
I can^o a noble tale for the nones,^o
With which I will now quite the Knight's tale."
Our Hoste saw that he was drunk of ale,
20 And said, "Abide, Robin, leve^o brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another.
Abide, and let us werken thriftily."^o
"By Goddes soule," quod^o he, "that will not I,
For I will speak or else go my way."
25 Our Host answerde, "Tell on, a devil way!^o
Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."
"Now herkneth," quod the Miller, "all and some.^o
But first I make a protestacioun^o
That I am drunk: I know it by my soun.^o
30 And therefore if that I misspeak or say,
Wite it^o the ale of Southwerk, I you pray;

For I will tell a legend^o and a life
 Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
 How that a clerk hath set the wright's cap."²
 35 The Reeve answered and saide, "Stint thy clap!^o
 Let be thy lewed^o drunken harlotry.^o
 It is a sin and eek^o a great folly
 To apairen^o any man or him defame,
 And eek to bringen wives in such fame.^o
 40 Thou maist enough of other thinges sayn."
 This drunken Miller spoke full soon again,^o
 And saide, "Leve^o brother Osewold,
 Who hath no wife, he is no cokewold.^o
 But I say not therefore that thou art one.
 45 There been full goode wives many one,^o
 And ever a thousand good ayains^o one bad.
 That knowestou^o well thyself but if^o thou mad.^o
 Why artou^o angry with my tale now?
 I have a wife, pardee,^o as well as thou,
 50 Yet nolde^o I, for the oxen in my plough,
 Take upon me more than enough^o
 As deemen of myself that I were one:^o
 I will believe well that I am none.
 An husband shall not been inquisitif
 55 Of Goddes privetee,^o nor of his wif.
 So^o he may finde Goddes foison^o there,
 Of the remenant needeth not enquire."³
 What should I more say but this Miller
 He nolde^o his wordes for no man forbear,^o
 60 But tolde his churl's tale in his manner.
 M'athinketh^o that I shall rehearse^o it here,
 And therefore every gentle wight^o I pray,
 Deemeth nought,^o for Goddes love, that I say
 Of evil intent, but for^o I must rehearse
 65 Their tales alle, be they bet^o or worse,
 Or elles falsen^o some of my matere.^o

And therefore, whoso list^o it not yhere,^o
 Turn over the leaf, and choose another tale,
 For he shall find enough, great and smale,
 70 Of storial thing that toucheth gentilesse,⁴
 And eek^o morality and holinesse:
 Blameth not me if that you choose amiss.^o
 The Miller is a churl, you know well this,
 So was the Reeve eek, and other mo,^o
 75 And harlotry^o they tolden bothe two.
 Aviseth you,^o and put me out of blame:
 And eek^o men shall not maken earnest of game.^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: The harsh voice traditionally associated with the portrayal of Pontius Pilate in medieval biblical plays.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Made a fool of the carpenter.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Of the rest there is no need to inquire.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Of historical matter that relates to noble conduct.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *company was not*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *recall*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *especially* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gentlefolk*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as I live*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unbuckled is the bag*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *can*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *repay*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *because of being drunk*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *with difficulty*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *would not remove*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *give way to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by (God's) arms*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *occasion*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *with propriety*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *said*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in the devil's name*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *one and all*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *public affirmation*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tone of voice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *blame it on*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(religious) narrative*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stop your chatter*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *coarse* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *obscenity*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *injure*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *report*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in reply*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cuckold*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *a one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for (every)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *you know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rave*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by God*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *would not*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *so much*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to think that I were one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secrets*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *provided that* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *plenty*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *would not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hold back, spare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I regret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repeat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *falsify* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *material* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wants* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make the wrong choice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ribaldry* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *think hard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take a joke seriously* [Return to reference](#) °

The Miller's Tale

Whilom^o there was dwelling at Oxenford^o
A riche gnof^o that guests held to board,^o
80 And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With him there was dwelling a povre^o scholar,
Hadde learned art,⁵ but all his fantasy^o
Was turned for to learn astrology,
And could a certain^o of conclusiouns,
85 To deemen by interrogaciouns,⁶
If that men asked him in certain houres
When that men should have drougt or elles
showers,
Or if men asked him what shall befall
Of everything—I may not reckon them all.
90 This clerk was cleped^o hende^o Nicholas.
Of deme^o love he could, and of solas,^o
And therto he was sly and full privee,^o
And like a maide meeke for to see.
A chamber had he in that hostelry
95 Alone, withouten any company,
Full fetisly ydight^o with herbes swoote,^o
And he himself as sweet as is the roote
Of licorice or any setewale.^o
His Almageste⁷ and bookes great and smale,
100 His astrelabye⁸ longing for^o his art,
His augrim stones^o layen fair^o apart
On shelves couched^o at his beddes head;
His press^o ycovered with a falding red;⁹
And all above there lay a gay sautry,¹
105 On which he made a-nightes^o melody
So swetely that all the chamber rong,^o
And *Angelus ad Virginem*² he song,
And after that he sang the *Kinges Note*:³

Full often blessed was his merry throat.
 110 And thus this sweete clerk his time spent
 After his frendes finding and his rent.⁴
 This carpenter had wedded new^o a wife
 Which that he loved more than his life.
 Of eighteteene years she was of age;
 115 Jealous he was, and held hire narwe^o in cage,
 For she was wild and young, and he was old
 And deemed himself been like a cokewold.⁵
 He knew not Cato,⁶ for his wit was rude,^o
 That bade^o man wed his similitude:^o
 120 Men sholde wedden^o after their estate,^o
 For youth and elde^o is often at debate.
 But sith^o that he was fallen in the snare,
 He must endure, as other folk, his care.
 Fair was this yonge wife,⁷ and therewithal
 125 As any weasel her body gent and small.^o
 A ceint^o she wered,^o barred^o all of silk;
 A barmecloth^o as white as morning milk
 Upon her lendes,^o full of many a gore;^o
 White was her smock, and broiden^o all before
 130 And eek^o behind, on her collar about,
 Of^o coal-black silk, within and eek without;^o
 The tapes^o of her white voluper^o
 Were of the same suite of^o her coler;^o
 Her filet^o broad of silk and set full high;
 135 And sikerly^o she had a likerous^o eye;
 Full small y pulled^o were her browes^o two,
 And those were bent,^o and black as any slo.^o
 She was full more blissful on to see^o
 Than is the newe perejonette^o tree,
 140 And softer than the wool is of a wether;^o
 And by her girdle^o hung a purse of leather,
 Tasseled with silk and pearled with latoun.⁸
 In all this world, to seeken up and doun,

145 There is no man so wise that coude thenche^o
 So gay a popelote^o or such a wenche.
 Full brighter was the shining^o of her hue^o
 Than in the Tour^o the noble yforges new.⁹
 But of her song, it was as loud and yerne^o
 As any swallow sitting on a berne.^o
 150 Thereto^o she could skip and make game^o
 As any kid or calf following his dame.^o
 Her mouth was sweet as bragot or the meeth,¹
 Or hoard of apples laid in hay or heath.^o
 Winsing^o she was as is a joly^o colt,
 155 Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.^o
 A brooch she bar^o upon her low coler^o
 As broad as is the boss of a bokeler;^o
 Her shoes were laced on her legges high.
 She was a primerole, a piggesnye,²
 160 For any lord to leggen^o in his bed,
 Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.
 Now sir, and eft^o sir, so befell the cas^o
 That on a day this hende^o Nicholas
 Fil^o with this yonge wife to rage^o and play
 165 While that her husbonde was at Oseney^o
 (As^o clerkes been full subtle and full quainte^o),
 And prively^o he caught hire^o by the queinte,³
 And said, "Ywis,^o but if^o I have my will,
 For derne^o love of thee, lemman,^o I spill,"^o
 170 And held her harde by the haunche-bones,^o
 And saide, "Lemman, love me all atones,^o
 Or I will dien,^o also^o God me save."
 And she sprang as a colt does in the trave,⁴
 And with her head she wried^o fast away;
 175 She said, "I will not kiss thee, by my fay.^o
 Why, let be," quod^o she, "let be, Nicholas!
 Or I will crye 'Out, harrow,^o and alas!
 Do way^o your handes, for your courtesy!"

180 This Nicholas gan^o mercy for to crye
 And spoke so fair, and profred him^o so fast,
 That she her love him granted atte last,
 And swore her oath by Saint Thomas of Kent⁵
 That she would been at his comandement,
 When that she may her leiser^o well espye.
 185 "Myn husband is so full of jealousy
 That but^o you waite^o well and be privee,^o
 I woot^o right well I nam but dead,"^o
 quod^o she,
 "Ye moste^o been full derne^o as in this cas."
 "Nay, therof care thee not," quod Nicholas.
 190 "A clerk hadde litherly biset^o his while,^o
 But if^o he could a carpenter beguile."
 And thus they been accorded^o and ysworn
 To wait^o a time, as I have told biforn.^o
 When Nicholas had done thus everydel,^o
 195 And thakked^o her upon the lendes^o well,
 He kissed hire sweet, and taketh his sautry^o
 And playeth fast, and maketh melody.
 Thanne fell it thus^o that to the parish chirche,
 Christes owene werkes for to wirche,^o
 200 This goode wife went on an haliday:^o
 Her forehead shone as bright as any day,
 So was it wasshen when she leet^o her werk.
 Now was there of that church a parish clerk.⁶
 The which that was ycleped^o Absolon:
 205 Crul^o was his hair, and as the gold it shoon,
 And strouted as a fanne⁷ large and brode;
 Full straight and even lay his joly^o shode.^o
 His rode^o was red, his eyen grey as goose.
 With Poules window⁸ corven^o on his shoes,
 210 In hoses^o red he wente fetisly.^o
 Yclad he was full small^o and properly,
 All in a kirtel^o of a light waget^o—

Full fair and thikke been the pointes^o set—
 And thereupon he had a gay surplis,^o
 215 As white as is the blosme^o upon the ris.^o
 A merry child^o he was, so God me save.
 Well could he laten blood,^o and clip,^o
 and shave,
 And maken a charter^o of land, or acquitaunce;^o ⁹
 In twenty manere^o could he trip and daunce
 220 After the school of Oxenforde tho,^o
 And with his legges casten^o to and fro,
 And playen songes on a small rubible;^o
 Therto he song sometime a loud quinible,^o
 And as well could he playe on a giterne:^o
 225 In all the town nas^o brewhouse ne taverne
 That he ne visited with his solas,^o
 Ther^o any gailard tappestere^o was.
 But sooth to say, he was somdeel squaimous^o
 Of^o farting, and of speeche daungerous.^o
 230 This Absolon, that joly^o was and gay,
 Gooth with a cencer^o on the haliday,^o
 Cencing^o the wives of the parish fast,^o
 And many a lovely look on them he cast,
 And namely^o on this carpenteres wife:
 235 To look on her him thought a merry life.
 She was so proper^o and sweet and likerous,^o
 I dare well say, if she had been a mous,
 And he a cat, he would her hente^o anon.
 This parish clerk, this joly^o Absolon,
 240 Hath in his herte such a love-longing^o
 That of no wife ne took he noon offring—
 For courtesy he said he wolde noon.^o
 The moone, when it was night, full brighte shoon,^o
 And Absolon his giterne^o hath ytake—
 245 For paramours^o he thoughte for to wake^o—
 And forth he gooth, jolif^o and amorous,

Til he came to the carpenteres hous,
 A little after cokkes^o had ycrowe,^o
 And dressed him up by a shot-windowe¹
 250 That was upon the carpenteres wall.
 He singeth in his voice gentle and small,^o
 "Now dere lady, if thy wille be,
 I pray you that ye will rue^o on me,"
 Full well accordant to his giterninge.²
 255 This carpenter awoke and heard him singe,
 And spoke unto his wife, and said anon,
 "What, Alison, heerestou^o not Absolon
 That chaunteth^o thus under oure bowres^o wall?"
 And she answered her housbonde therewithal,^o
 260 "Yes, God woot,^o John, I heere it everydel."^o
 This passeth forth. What will ye bet than wel?³
 From day to day this joly^o Absolon
 So woweth^o hire that him is woe-bigon:^o
 He waketh all the night and all the day;
 265 He combed his lokkes^o broad^o and made him gay;
 He woweth hire^o by menes^o and brocage,^o

 And swore he wolde been her owene page;^o
 He singeth, brokking^o as a nightingale;
 He sent hir piment,^o meeth,^o and spiced ale,
 270 And wafres^o piping hot out of the glede;^o
 And for she was of town, he profred mede⁴—
 For some folk will be wonnen for^o richesse,
 And some for strokes,^o and some for gentillesse.^o
 Sometimes to show his lightness^o and maistrye,^o
 275 He playeth Herodes⁵ upon a scaffold hye.
 But what availeth him^o as in this cas?
 She loveth so this hende^o Nicholas
 That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;⁶
 He ne hadde for his labor but a scorn.
 280 And thus she maketh Absolon her ape,^o

And all his earnest turneth til a jape.°
 Full sooth° is this proverb, it is no lie;
 Men saith right thus: "Alway the nye slye°
 Maketh the ferre leve° to be loth."°
 285 For though that Absolon be wood° or wroth,°
 Because that he far was from her sight,
 This nigh° Nicholas stood in his light.
 Now bear thee well,° thou hende Nicholas,
 For Absolon may wail and sing "alas."
 290 And so befell it on a Saturday
 This carpenter was goon to Oseney,
 And hende Nicholas and Alisoun
 Accorded been to this conclusioun,°
 That Nicholas shall shapen° them a wile°
 295 This sely° jealous husband to beguile,°
 And if so be this game went aright,
 She sholden sleepen in his arms all night—
 For this was his desire and hers also.
 And right anon, withouten wordes mo,°
 300 This Nicholas no longer wolde tarry,
 But dooth full soft° unto his chamber carry
 Bothe meat° and drinke for a day or twaye,°
 And to her husband bade hire for° to say,
 If that he asked after Nicholas,
 305 She sholde say she niste° where he was—
 Of all that day she saw him not with eye:
 She trowed° that he was in maladye,°
 For for no cry her maide could him call,
 He nolde° answer for nothing that might fall.°
 310 This passeth forth all thilke° Saturday
 That Nicholas still in his chamber lay,
 And ate, and slept, or dide what him leste,°
 Til Sunday that the sonne gooth to reste.
 This sely° carpenter hath great mervaille°
 315 Of° Nicholas, or what thing might him ail,
 And said, "I am adrad,° by Saint Thomas,

It stondeth not aright with Nicholas.
 God shilde^o that he deide^o sodeinly!
 This world is now full tikel,^o sikerly:^o
 320 I saw today a corpse yborn^o to chirche
 That now a^o Monday last I saw him wirche.^o
 Go up," quod^o he unto his knave^o anon,
 "Clepe^o at his door or knokke with a stoon.^o
 Look how it is and tell me boldely."
 325 This knave gooth him up full sturdily,
 And at the chamber-doore while that he stood
 He cried and knocked as that^o he were wood,^o
 "What? How? What do ye, master Nicholay?
 How may ye sleepen all the longe day?"
 330 But all for not: he herde not a word.
 An hole he found full low upon a bord,
 Thereas^o the cat was wont^o in for to creep,
 And at that hole he looked in full deep
 And atte last he had of him a sight.
 335 This Nicholas sat ever caping^o upright
 As^o he hadde kiked^o on the newe moon.
 Adown he gooth and told his master soon
 In what array^o he saw this ilke^o man.
 This carpenter to blessen him^o began,
 340 And said, "Help us, Sainte Frideswide!⁷
 A man woot^o little what him shall bitide.^o
 This man is falle, with his astromye,^o
 In some woodnesse^o or in some agony.
 I thought ay^o well how that it sholde be:
 345 Men should not know of Goddes privetee.^o
 Ye, blessed be always a lewed^o man
 That not but only his bileve can.^o
 So fared another clerk with astromye:
 He walked in the feeldes for to pry^o
 350 Upon the sterres,^o what there sholde befall,
 Til he was in a marle-pit^o yfall⁸—

He saw not that. But yet, by Saint Thomas,
 Me reweth sore for^o hende^o Nicholas.
 He shall be rated of^o his studying,
 355 If that I may, by Jesus, hevene king!
 Get me a staff that I may underspore,^o
 While that thou, Robin, hevest^o up the door.
 He shall^o out of his studying, as I guess."
 And to the chamber door he gan him dress.^o
 360 His knave was a strong carl^o for the nones,^o
 And by the hasp he haf^o it up atones:^o
 Into^o the floor the dore fil^o anon.
 This Nicholas sat ay^o as still as stoon,
 And ever caped^o up into the air.
 365 This carpenter wende^o he were in despair,
 And hente^o him by the shoulders mightily,
 And shook him hard, and cride spitously,^o
 "What, Nicholay, what, how! What! Look adoun!
 Awake, and think on Christes passioun!^o
 370 I crouche thee from elves and from wightes."⁹
 Therwith the nightspell^o said he anonrightes^o
 On four halves^o of the house about,
 And on the threshold on the dore without:^o
 "Jesus Christ and Sainte Benedight,¹
 375 Blesse this house from every wicked wight!^o
 For nightes nerye^o the White Pater Noster.²
 Where wentestou,^o thou Sainte Petres soster?"^o
 And at the last this hende^o Nicholas
 Gan for to sike^o sore, and said, "Alas,
 380 Shall all the world be lost eftsoones^o now?"
 This carpenter answerde, "What saistou?"^o
 What, think on God as we do, men that swink."^o
 This Nicholas answerde, "Fetch me drink,
 And after will I speak in privetee^o
 385 Of certain thing that toucheth^o me and thee.
 I will tell it none other man, certain."

This carpenter gooth down and comth again,
 And brought of mighty^o ale a large quart,
 And when that each of them had drunk his part,
 390 This Nicholas his dore faste shet,^o
 And down the carpenter by him he set,
 And saide, "John, my hoste lief^o and dear,
 Thou shall upon thy trouthe^o swere me here
 That to no wight^o thou shalt this conseil^o wray;^o
 395 For it is Christes conseil that I say,
 And if thou tell it man,^o thou art forlore,^o
 For this vengeance thou shall have therefore
 That if thou wraye^o me, thou shall be wood.^o
 "Nay, Christ forbid it, for his holy blood,"
 400 Quod tho^o this sely^o man. "I nam no
 labbe,^o
 And though I say, I nam not lief to gabbe.³
 Say what thou will, I shall it never tell
 To child ne wife, by him that harwed hell."⁴
 "Now John," quod Nicholas, "I will not lie.
 405 I have yfound in my astrologye,
 As I have looked in the moone bright,
 That now a Monday next, at quarter night,^o
 Shall fall a rain, and that so wild and wood,^o
 That half so great was never Noah's flood.⁵
 410 This world," he said, "in lasse^o than an hour
 Shall all be dreint,^o so hideous is the shower.
 Thus shall mankinde drenche^o and lose their life."
 This carpenter answered, "Alas, my wife!
 And shall she drenche? Alas, my Alisoun!"
 415 For sorwe of this he fell almost adoun,
 And said, "Is there no remedy in this cas?"
 "Why yes, for^o Gode," quod^o hende^o Nicholas,
 "If thou wolt werken after lore and reed⁶—
 Thou maist not werken after thyn owene heed;^o
 420 For thus saith Solomon⁷ that was full true,

'Work all by conseil^o and thou shall not rue.'^o
 And if thou werken will by good conseil,
 I undertake, withouten mast or sail,
 Yet shall I save her and thee and me.
 425 Hastou^o not heard how saved was Noe^o
 When that Oure Lord hadde warned him biforn
 That all the world with water sholde be lorn?"^o
 "Yes," quod^o this carpenter, "full yore ago."^o
 "Hastou not heard," quod Nicholas, "also
 430 The sorwe of Noe with his fellowship
 Er^o that he mighte get his wife to ship?⁸
 Him hadde levere,^o I dare well undertake,
 At thilke^o time than alle his wetheres^o blake
 That she had had a ship herself alone.
 435 And therefore woostou^o what is best to done?
 This asketh^o haste, and of an hastif^o thing
 Men may not preach or maken tarrying.
 Anon go get us fast into this in^o
 A kneading-trough or elles^o a kimelin^o
 440 For each of us; but looke^o that they be large,^o
 In whiche we mowen swim^o as in a barge,^o
 And have therinne vitale suffisaunt^o
 But for a day—fie on the remenaunt!
 The water shall aslake^o and goon away
 445 Aboute prime^o upon the nexte day.
 But Robin may not wite^o of this, thy knave,
 Ne eek^o thy maide Gille I may not save.
 Axe^o not why, for though thou axe me,
 I will not tellen Goddes privetee.^o
 450 Suffiseth thee, but if^o thy wittes mad,^o
 To have as great a grace as Noah had.
 Thy wife shall I well saven, out of doubt.
 Go now thy way, and speed thee hereabout.^o
 But when thou hast for her and thee and me
 455 Ygeten^o us these kneading-tubbes three,

Thanne shaltou^o hangen them in the roof full high,
 That no man of oure purveyance^o espy.
 And when thou thus hast doon as I have said,
 And hast oure vitaille^o faire^o in them ylaid,
 460 And eek^o an ax to smite the cord atwo,^o
 When that the water comth that we may go,
 And break an hole on high upon the gable
 Unto the gardenward,^o over the stable,
 That we may freely passen forth our way,
 465 When that the grete shower is goon away,
 Thanne shaltou swim as merry, I undertake,
 As dooth the white duck after her drake.
 Thanne will I clepe,^o 'How,^o Alison? How, John?
 Be merry, for the flood will pass anon.'
 470 And thou wolt sayn, 'Hail, master Nicholay!
 Good morwe, I see thee well, for it is day!'
 And then shall we be lordes all our life
 Of all the world, as Noe^o and his wife.
 But of oo^o thing I warne thee full right:
 475 Be well avised^o on that ilke^o night
 That we been entred into shippes bord
 That none of us ne speke not a word,
 Ne clepe,^o ne crye, but been in his prayere,
 For it is Goddes owene heeste deere.^o
 480 Thy wife and thou mote hange far atwinne,^o
 For that^o bitwixe^o you shall be no sinne—
 No more in looking than there shall in deed.
 This ordinance^o is said: go, God thee speed.
 Tomorwe at night when men been all asleep,
 485 Into oure kneading-tubbes will we creep,
 And sitten there, abiding^o Goddes grace.
 Go now thy way, I have no longer space^o
 To make of this no longer sermoning.
 Men say thus: 'Send the wise and say nothing.'
 490 Thou art so wise it needeth thee not teach:^o
 Go save oure life, and that I thee beseech."^o

This sely^o carpenter gooth forth his way:
 Full oft he said "alas" and "wailaway"
 And to his wife he told his privetee,^o
 495 And she was war,^o and knew it bet^o than he,
 What all this quainte cast was for to saye.^o
 But nonetheless she ferde as^o she wolde deye,
 And said, "Alas, go forth thy way anon.^o
 Help us to scape,^o or we been dead echon.^o
 500 I am thy trewe verray wedded wife:
 Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure life."
 Lo, which^o a great thing is affeccioun!^o
 Men may dien^o of imaginacioun,
 So deepe^o may impression^o be take.
 505 This sely carpenter biginneth quake;^o
 Him thinketh verrailiche^o that he may see
 Noah's flood come walwing^o as the sea
 To drenchen^o Alison, his honey dear.
 He weepeth, wailleth, maketh sorry cheer;^o
 510 He siketh^o with full many a sorry swogh,^o
 And gooth and geteth him a kneading-trogh,
 And after a tub and a kimelin,^o
 And prively^o he sente them to his in^o
 And hung them in the roof in privetee;
 515 His^o owene hand he made ladders three,
 To climben by the runges^o and the stalkes^o
 Unto the tubbes hanging in the balkes,^o
 And them vitailed,^o bothe trough and tub,
 With bread and cheese and good ale in a jub^o
 520 Suffising right enough as for a day.
 But er that^o he had made all this array,^o
 He sent his knave, and eek his wench^o also,
 Upon his neede^o to London for to go.
 And on the Monday when it drow to^o night,
 525 He shut his door withouten candle-light
 And dressed^o alle thing as it sholde be;
 And shortly up they clomben^o alle three.

They seten stille well a furlong way.⁹
 530 "Now, Pater Noster, clum,"¹ said Nicholay,
 And "Clum" quod John, and "Clum" said Alisoun.
 This carpenter said his devocioun,
 And stille he sit and biddeth his prayere,
 Awaiting on the rain, if he it heere.^o
 535 The dede^o sleep, for weary business,^o
 Fell on this carpenter right as I guess
 Aboute curfew time,² or little more.
 For travailling^o of his gost^o he groneth sore,
 And eft he routeth, for his head mislay.³
 540 Down of the ladder stalketh Nicholay,
 And Alison full softe adown she sped:
 Withouten wordes more they goon to bed
 Theras^o the carpenter is wont^o to lie.
 There was the revel and the melody,
 545 And thus lith^o Alison and Nicholas
 In bisiness of mirth and of solace,
 Til that the belle of Laudes⁴ gan to ring
 And freres^o in the chauncel^o gonne sing.
 This parish clerk, this amorous Absolon,
 550 That is for love always so woebegone,
 Upon the Monday was at Oseneye,
 With company him to disport and play,
 And asked upon cas a cloisterer⁵
 Full prively^o after John the carpenter;
 555 And he drew him apart out of the chirche,^o
 And said, "I noot:^o I saw him here not wirche^o ⁶
 Since Saturday. I trowe^o that he be went^o
 For timber there our abbot hath him sent.
 For he is wont^o for timber for to go,
 560 And dwellen atte grange^o a day or two.
 Or elles^o he is at his house, certayn.
 Where that he be I can not soothly sayn."
 This Absolon full jolif^o was and light,^o

And thoughte, "Now is time to wake all night,
 For sikerly, ^o I saw him not stirring
 565 Aboute his door sin ^o day began to spring.
 So mote ^o I thrive, I shall at cokkes crow
 Full prively knocken at his window
 That stant ^o full low upon his boures ^o wall.
 To Alison now will I tellen all
 570 My love-longing, ^o for yet I shall not miss ^o
 That at the leeste way ^o I shall hire ^o kiss.
 Some manere comfort shall I have, parfay. ^o
 My mouth hath icched ^o all this longe day:
 That is a sign of kissing at the least.
 575 All night me mette ^o eek ^o I was at a feast.
 Therefore I will go sleep an hour or twaye, ^o
 And all the night then will I wake and play."
 When that the firste cock hath crow, anon
 Up rist ^o this joly ^o lover Absolon,
 580 And him arrayeth ^o gay at point devis. ^o
 But first he cheweth grain ^o and licoris,
 To smellen sweet, er ^o he hadde combed his heer.
 Under his tongue a trewe-love ⁷ he beer, ^o
 For thereby wende ^o he to be gracious. ^o
 585 He rometh ^o to the carpenteres hous,
 And still he stant ^o under the shot-window—
 Unto his breast it raughte, ^o it was so low—
 And oft he cougheth with a semy soun. ^o
 "What do ye, honey-comb, sweet Alisoun,
 590 My faire bird, my sweete cinamome? ^o
 Awaketh, lemman ^o mine, and speketh to me.
 Well little thinken ye upon my woe
 That for your love I swete ^o there ^o I go.
 No wonder is though that I swelte ^o and swete:
 595 I moorne ^o as dooth a lamb after the tete. ^o
 Ywis, lemman, I have such love-longing,
 That like a turtle ^o true is my mourning: ^o

I may not eat no more than a maide."
 "Go from the windowe, Jakke fool," she saide.
 600 "As help me God, it will not be com-pa-me.°
 I love another, and elles° I were to blame,
 Well bet° than thee, by Jesus, Absolon.
 Go forth thy way or I will cast a stoon,
 And lat me sleep, a twenty devele way."°
 605 "Alas," quod° Absolon, "and wailaway,
 That trewe love was ever so yvele biset.°
 Thanne kiss me, sin° that it may be no bet,°
 For Jesus love and for the love of me."
 "Woltou° thanne go thy way therwith?" quod° she.
 610 "Ye, certes,° lemman,"° quod this Absolon.
 "Thanne make thee ready," quod she. "I come
 anon."
 And unto Nicholas she saide still,°
 "Now hust,° and thou shalt laughen all thy fill."
 This Absolon down set him on his knees,
 615 And said, "I am a lord at alle degrees,°
 For after this I hope there cometh more.
 Lemman,° thy grace, and sweete bird, thyn ore!"°
 The windowe she undoth, and that in haste.
 "Have do," quod she, "come of and speed thee faste,
 620 °
 Lest that oure neighbors thee espy."
 This Absolon gan wipe his mouth full dry:
 Dark was the night as pitch or as the coal,
 And at the window out she put her hole,
 And Absolon, him fil no bet ne wers,⁸
 625 But with his mouth he kissed her naked ers°
 Full savourly,° er° he were war° of this.
 Aback he sterte,° and thought it was amiss,
 For well he wiste° a womman hath no berd.°
 He felt a thing all rough and longe yherd,°
 630 And saide, "Fie, alas, what have I do?"

"Teehee," quod^o she, and clapte the windowe to.
 And Absolon gooth forth a sorry pas.^o
 "A beard, a beard!" quod hende Nicholas,
 "By Goddes corpus,^o this gooth fair and wel."
 635 This sely^o Absolon heard everydel,^o
 And on his lip he gan for anger bite,
 And to himself he said, "I shall thee quite."^o
 Who rubbeth now, who froteth^o now his lippes
 With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with
 640 chippes,
 But Absolon, that saith full oft "Alas"?
 "My soule bitake^o I unto Satanas,^o
 But me were levere^o than all this town," quod he,
 "Of this despit^o awroken^o for to be.
 Alas," quod he, "alas I ne had ybleint!"^o
 645 His hote love was cold and all yqueint,^o
 For from that time that he hadde kissed her ers
 Of paramours^o he sette not a kers,⁹
 For he was heled^o of his maladye.^o
 Full ofte paramours he gan defye,^o
 650 And wept as dooth a child that is ybete.^o
 A softe paas^o he went over the streete
 Until^o a smith men clepen^o daun^o Gervais,
 That in his forge smithed plough harneis:^o
 He sharpeth^o shaar^o and cultour¹ busily.
 655 This Absolon knokketh all easily,^o
 And said, "Undo, Gervais, and that anon."^o
 "What, who artou?"^o "It am I, Absolon."
 "What, Absolon? What, Christes sweete tree!"^o
 Why rise ye so rathe?^o Ey, *benedicite*,^o
 660 What aileth you? Some gay girl, God it woot,^o
 Has brought you thus upon the viritoot.^o
 By Sainte Note,² ye woot well what I mean."
 This Absolon ne roughete not a bean^o
 Of all his play. No word again^o he yaf:^o
 665

He hadde more tow on his distaff³
 Than Gervais knew, and saide, "Friend so dear,
 This hote cultour^o in the chimenee^o here,
 As lene^o it me: I have therewith to
 doon.^o
 I will bring it thee again full soon."
 670 Gervais answerede, "Certes, were it gold,
 Or in a poke nobles alle untold,⁴
 Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smith.
 Ay, Christes foe,⁵ what will ye do therewith?"
 "Therof,"^o quod^o Absolon, "be as be may.
 675 I shall well tell it thee another day,"
 And caughte the cultour by the colde stele.^o
 Full soft out at the door he gan to stele,
 And went unto the carpenteres wall:
 He cougheth first and knokketh therewithal
 680 Upon the windowe, right as he did er.^o
 This Alison answerde, "Who is there
 That knokketh so? I warrant^o it a thief."
 "Why, nay," quod he, "God woot,^o my sweete lief,^o
 I am thine Absolon, my dereling.^o
 685 Of gold," quod^o he, "I have thee brought a ring—
 My mother yaf^o it me, so God me save;
 Full fine it is and therto well ygrave:^o
 This will I given thee if thou me kiss."
 This Nicholas was risen for to piss,
 690 And thought he wolde amenden^o all the jape:^o
 He sholde kiss his ers^o er^o that he scape.^o
 And up the windowe did he hastily,
 And out his ers he putteth prively,
 Over the buttoke to the haunche-bon.^o
 695 And therewith spoke this clerk, this Absolon,
 "Speak, sweete bird, I noot not^o where thou art."
 This Nicholas anon leet fle^o a fart
 As great as it hadde been a thunder-dent^o

700 That with the stroke he was almost yblent,^o
 And he was ready with his iron hoot,^o
 And Nicholas amidde the ers^o he smoot:^o
 Off gooth the skin an hande-brede^o aboute;
 The hote cultour^o brende so his toute^o
 705 That for the smart^o he wende for to^o die;
 As he were wood^o for woe he gan to cry,
 "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!"
 This carpenter out of his slumber sterte,^o
 And herde one cryen "Water!" as he were wood,^o
 710 And thought, "Alas, now cometh Noweles flood!"⁶
 He sit him up withoute wordes mo,^o
 And with his ax he smote the corde two,
 And down gooth all: he found neither to sell
 Ne breed ne ale til he came to the cell,⁷
 715 Upon the floor, and there aswouned^o he lay.
 Up start^o her Alison and Nicholay,
 And criden "Out" and "Harrow"^o in the streete.
 The neighbors, bothe small and grete,
 In ronnen for to gauren^o on this man
 That aswouned lay both pale and wan,
 720 For with the fall he brosten^o had his arm;
 But stand he must unto his owene harm,⁸
 For when he spoke he was anon bore doun^o
 With^o hende Nicholas and Alisoun:
 They tolden every man that he was wood^o—
 725 He was aghast so of Noweles flood,
 Through fantasye, that of his vanitee^o
 He had ybought him kneading-tubbes three,
 And hadde them hanged in the roof above,
 And that he prayed^o them, for Goddes love,
 730 To sitten in the roof, *par compaigny*.^o
 The folk gan laughen at his fantasy.
 Into the roof they kiken^o and they cape,^o
 And turned all his harm unto a jape,^o

735 For what so that this carpenter answered,
 It was for not: no man his reason^o heard;
 With oathes great he was so sworn adown,
 That he was holden wood^o in all the town,
 For every clerk anonright held^o with other:
 They saide, "The man was wood, my leve^o brother,"
 740 And every wight^o gan laughen at this strife.^o
 Thus swived^o was the carpenteres wife
 For^o all his keeping^o and his jalousye,
 And Absolon has kissed her nether^o eye,
 And Nicholas is scalded in the toute:^o
 745 This tale is done, and God save all the route!^o

Endnotes

- Note 5: Who had completed the first stage of university education, the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: And he knew a number of principles by which to judge in astrological analyses.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: *Almagest*, an astronomical treatise by the Egyptian scientist Ptolemy (active 127–148 C.E.).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Astrolabe, an astronomical instrument (about which Chaucer wrote a prose treatise).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Red wool blanket.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A psaltery, a metal-stringed musical instrument somewhat like a modern zither (the Clerk owns one too; *General Prologue*, line 296).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "The Angel's Address to the Virgin" (Latin), a popular late medieval religious song about the Annunciation.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An as yet unidentified (popular?) song.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In accordance with what his friends provided, and his own income.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Judged himself to be a potential cuckold.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Dionysius Cato (3rd or 4th c. C.E.), the supposed author of a collection of Latin moral maxims used as an elementary textbook.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: This portrait both follows and parodies the rules for description in 13th-century poetic handbooks such as that of Geoffrey de Vinsauf, where a description head-to-toe, *effictio*, is followed by a moral point about character (*notatio*). Alison's portrait is less than orderly in its sequence and concludes with leering anticipation of sexual enjoyment (lines 160–62).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Decorated with tassels on which were pearl-shaped spangles of brass.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: New-minted gold coin.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Braggot or mead, two alcoholic drinks made with honey.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A primrose or cowslip, a pig's eye: spring flowers, names used figuratively of pretty young women.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Private parts.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A frame restraining a wild or stubborn horse; the animal imagery is continued from lines 151–55.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Saint Thomas à Becket (ca. 1118–1170), the "blissful martyr" of *The General Prologue*, line 17.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An adjunct assistant (in at least minor holy orders) to the parish priest—a position neither full-time nor well-paid.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Spread out like a fan (a wide-mouthed basket for separating grain from chaff).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: St. Paul's window: that is, intricate tooled designs.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Parish clerks, with their university education, were forced to find other part-time jobs to make ends meet: Absolon as a barber-surgeon, cutting hair and letting blood, and as a legal draftsman.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Took up his position by a casement window.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In harmony with his guitar playing.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: So it goes. What do you want next?—This is probably the narrator’s comment, rather than Alison’s.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: And because she was a townswoman, he offered payment.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Herod, a role traditionally played as a bully in the mystery or cycle plays—performed on scaffolds, or temporary platform stages. For more on the mystery plays, see pp. 247–48.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: “To blow the buck’s horn” is to go without reward, waste one’s time.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A princess and abbess of early medieval England (d. ca. 727), the patron saint of the city and university of Oxford.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A story told of the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Thales (ca. 620–ca. 545 B.C.E.).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I make the sign of the cross over you against elves and wicked creatures.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547), Italian monk who is considered the father of Western monasticism; he was the author of the Benedictine Rule.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The White Lord’s Prayer, a charm, was considered to offer powerful protection against evil spirits. What is being represented here is John’s panic, taking the form of a jumble of pious jargon.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: And though I say it myself, I don’t like to gossip.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: “Him that harrowed hell” is Christ; the story is told in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See Genesis 6–9: God decides to destroy his corrupted creation and instructs Noah, a righteous man, to build an ark to preserve himself. Forty days of rain drowns all living creatures except those on the ark.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: If you are willing to act according to instruction and advice.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A king of Israel, renowned in the Hebrew Bible for his wisdom.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A reference to the comic scenes in the biblical cycle plays, in which Noah's wife refuses to enter the ark.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: They sat still the time it takes to go a furlong.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Clum* may mean "hush," but probably represents the conclusion of murmured prayers.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The curfew bell was rung after dusk, at 8 or 9 p.m.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Then he snores, for his head lay at a bad angle.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Lauds, the second church service of the day, sung at daybreak.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: And happened to ask a resident canon.—Absolon has entered the cloisters of Osney Abbey, an Augustinian convent outside Oxford.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: I have not seen him working here.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A truelove—an herb whose four leaves with a single flower or berry in the center resemble a love knot.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: It befell him no better or worse (than that . . .): that is, such was his luck.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: He didn't care a piece of watercress (something of little value) for a woman's love.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A coulter, the blade fixed on a plow that cuts the turf.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Perhaps St. Neot (d. ca. 870?), a monk who lived in Cornwall.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: More fiber (for spinning) on his distaff: that is, more on his mind.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Countless gold coins in a bag.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, the devil.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: John confuses Noah and Nowel, that is, advent. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: He had no time to sell either bread or ale until he arrived at the bottom. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: But he had to stand up (on his own account), to his own detriment. [Return to reference 8](#)

Notes

- °: *once upon a time* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Oxford* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *churl* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *took in lodgers* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *poor* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *desire* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *certain (number)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *called* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *suave, clever* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *clandestine* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasures* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secretive* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *elegantly garnished* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sweet* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *setwall (ginger)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belonging to* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *counters used in arithmetic* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *neatly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *set* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *storage chest* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *at nights* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rang* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lately* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *her closely (confined)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *untutored* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *who advised* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *equal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *marry* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *old age*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slender and delicate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wore* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *striped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *apron*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loins* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cloth strip*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *embroidered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *both inside and outside*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ribbons* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cap*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cloth as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *collar*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *headband*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wanton, roaming*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delicately plucked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyebrows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arching* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sloeberry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to look upon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(castrated) ram*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *imagine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart, pet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *radiance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complexion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Tower of London*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *lively*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moreover* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *play, frolic*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *its mother*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heather*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skittish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frisky*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straight as an arrow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wore* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *collar*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shield*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *again* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it so happened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flirt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Osney (near Oxford)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *privately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thighs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *twisted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *take away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made advances*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *opportunity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be on guard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *am as good as dead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have poorly used* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *watch for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every bit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *patted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loins*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stringed instrument*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it so happened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perform*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy day*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *left off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *parting (of the hair)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complexion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tights* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegantly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trimly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tunic* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *blue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laces*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surplice (a clerical vestment)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blossom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bough*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *young man*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bleed (patients)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cut (hair)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *legal release*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ways*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fiddle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *false alto*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guitar (small lute)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there was no*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entertainment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lively barmaid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rather squeamish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prudish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *incense burner* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy day*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perfuming* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delectable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have pounced on her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lovesickness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not want any*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shone*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *guitar*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *love's sake* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remain awake*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lusty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *roosters* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high-pitched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have pity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you hear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chants* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every bit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant, amorous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woos* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afflicted with woe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hair* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wide-spreading*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wooed her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go-betweens* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mediation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *personal servant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trilling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mulled wine* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pastries* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coals*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *won over by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *courtesy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *facility* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virtuosity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what good does it do him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dupe*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *into a joke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely true*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the sly man nearby*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distant dear one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unwelcome*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crazed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *angry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearby*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carry on*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decision*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrange* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deception*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *simple, poor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very quietly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *told her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *didn't know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *this*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he wanted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *simple* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wondered greatly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forbid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *died*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *precarious* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *work*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *manservant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *though* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gaping*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gazed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will happen to him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *astronomy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *madness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secrets*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uneducated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows only his creed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *look*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stars*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clay pit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I sorely pity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scolded for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pry up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shall come*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *addressed his efforts*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fellow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purpose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heaved* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *onto* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fell* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gaped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vehemently* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the Crucifixion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *night charm* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sides* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outside* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *creature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *defend (us)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did you go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sister* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sigh* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a second time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are you saying* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *work* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *affects* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strong* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shut* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beloved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *word of honor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *man* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disclose* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anyone* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *betray* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go mad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said then* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *simple*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blabbermouth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *after midnight*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *furious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *less*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drowned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drown* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *own judgment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be sorry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Have you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Noah*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long ago*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he would have preferred*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rams*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *requires* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *urgent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brewing tub*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make sure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wide*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *can float* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vessel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *food enough*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *diminish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *9 a.m.*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *know*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ask*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secrets*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go mad*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *get on with it*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *got*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shall you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *provision*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *provisions* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *carefully*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in two*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *toward the garden*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *call* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hello*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *like Noah*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *take care* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *same*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *call out*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *precious command*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *must hang far apart*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in order that* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *between*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *order*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *awaiting*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *time*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *there is no need to teach you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *I beg you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *simple*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secret*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *aware* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *better*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ingenious trick meant*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *acted as if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *emotion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deeply* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mental image* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to tremble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surging* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drown* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighs* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *groan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brewing tub* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dwelling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with his* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rungs* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uprights* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rafters* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stocked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jug* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preparation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *serving maid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on an errand for John* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *draw toward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arranged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *climbed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to see if he might hear it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wearied by activity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *affliction* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *spirit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *friars* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *church*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *don't know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *work*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *has gone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at the outlying farm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sportive* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stands* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lovesickness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *miss out*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at least* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *itched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rises* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elegant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dresses* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to perfection*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cardamom*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *supposed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strolls*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stands*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reached*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small sound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cinnamon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wherever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grow faint*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *teat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turtledove* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lamentation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *come-kiss-me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *otherwise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the name of twenty devils*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ill-used*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quietly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hush*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in every way*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetheart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *favor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hurry up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arse*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *with relish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aware* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sprang* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long-haired* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walking sadly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *body* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hapless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every bit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay you back* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wipes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Satan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I had rather* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *insult* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turned aside* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quenched* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(romantic) love* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *illness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *renounce* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beaten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quiet walk* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sir* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equipment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharpens* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plowshare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quietly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *now, immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are you* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *dear cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *early* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bless me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prowl*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *didn't care a bean*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in reply* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot plow blade* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fireplace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *please lend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *something to do with it*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concerning that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *handle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *darling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *engraved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improve on* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thigh*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *let fly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thunderbolt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blinded*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *smote*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *handsbreadth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plow blade* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expected to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crazed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a faint*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Help*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gape, peer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once talked down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *folly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *asked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for company's sake*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *argument, sense*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *considered mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fuss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *screwed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *despite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guarding*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lower*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company*[Return to reference](#) °

The Man of Law's Epilogue

After *The Miller's Tale* concludes, the Reeve is furious. Since he is a carpenter as well as estate manager (the meaning of "reeve"), he interprets the story as a personal insult and retaliates with a fabliau about a miller whose wife and daughter are bedded by two clerks. Next, the Cook begins yet another fabliau, which breaks off after fifty-five lines, thereby closing Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer may never have settled on a final order for the tales he completed, but all modern editors, following many manuscripts, agree in putting *The Man of Law's Tale* next. The Man of Law tells a long moralistic tale about the many trials of the heroine Constance, named for the virtue of constancy she personifies. This tale is complete, but it nonetheless suggests that *The Canterbury Tales* reaches us as a work in progress, which Chaucer kept revising, inadvertently creating many problems for scribes and editors. For instance, in the link that introduces him, the Man of Law says he will tell a tale in prose, but the story of Constance turns out to be in seven-line stanzas called rhyme royal. That inconsistency has led to speculation that at one time the Man of Law was assigned the long prose allegory that Chaucer later reassigned to his own pilgrim persona, known as *The Tale of Melibee*.

In thirty-five manuscripts *The Man of Law's Tale* is followed by an *Epilogue* (omitted in twenty-two of the manuscripts). The *Epilogue* begins with the Host praising *The Man of Law's Tale* and calling upon the Parson to tell another uplifting tale. The Parson, however, rebukes the Host for swearing. The Host angrily accuses the Parson of being a "Lollard," a derogatory term for followers of the reformist polemicist John Wycliffe—Chaucer's only overt reference to this important religious and political controversy.

As the *Epilogue* continues, a third speaker, about whose identity the manuscripts disagree (six read "Summoner"; twenty-eight, "Squire"; and one, "Shipman"), interrupts with the promise to tell a

merry tale. Several modern editions print *The Man of Law's Epilogue* followed by *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, as the start of a new group of tales. Because the third speaker sounds like the Wife, an argument has been made that she is the pilgrim who refers to "My jolly body" (line 23), who at one time told a fabliau tale in which the narrator speaks of married women in the first-person plural ("we," "us," "our"). Chaucer, so the argument goes, later gave that story to the Shipman. If in fact the Wife of Bath did once tell what is now *The Shipman's Tale*, that would be an indication of the shifting and exciting possibilities that Chaucer continued to discover in the relationships between teller and tale.

The Man of Law's Epilogue

Our Host upon his stirrups stood anon
And said, "Goode men, herkneth^o everichon,^o
This was a thrifty^o tale for the nones!^o
Sir parish priest," quod^o he, "for Goddes bones,
Tel us a tale as was thy forward yore.^o
5 I see well that ye learned men in lore^o
Can^o mucche good, by Goddes dignity."
The Parson him answerde, "*Benedicite*,^o
What aileth^o the man so sinfully to swere?"
Oure Host answered, "O Jankin,¹ be ye there?
10 I smell a loller² in the wind," quod he.
"Now, goode men," quod our Hoste, "herkneth^o me:
Abideth,^o for Goddes digne^o passioun,
For we shall have a predicacioun.^o
This loller here will prechen^o us somewhat."
15 "Nay, by my father's soul, that shall he not,"
Said the [Wife of Bathe],³ "shall he not preach:
He shall no gospel glosen^o here ne teach.
We leven^o alle in the greate God," quod [she].
"He wolde sowen^o some difficulty
20 Or sprengen cockel^o in oure clene corn.^o
And therefore, Host, I warne^o thee biforn,^o
My jolly body^o shall a tale telle,
And I shall clinken^o you so merry a belle
That I shall waken all this company.
25 But it shall not been of philosophy,
Ne physlias,⁴ ne termes quaint^o of lawe:
There is but little Latin in my mawe."^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: A mocking name for a priest. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The meaning of *loller* has been much debated. It is commonly applied to those followers of John Wycliffe (d. 1384) who pressed for ecclesiastical reform and were soon (in the 1390s, especially after the statute of 1401) to be accused of heresy. This more specialized use replaces the broader meaning, “idler” (one who lolls). Like the Wycliffites, the Parson disapproves of swearing and of “tales,” vernacular fictions, opposed here to “predicacioun,” or preaching.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The manuscripts say “Squier,” “Sumnour,” or “Shipman”—none says “Wif of Bathe,” which is E. T. Donaldson’s brilliant emendation. Donaldson argues that the tale originally intended for the Wife of Bath is later given to the Shipman, and that this switch represents Chaucer’s onetime, but not necessarily final, intention. The Wife therefore introduces her own tale (in the usual ordering of parts): the reference to “my jolly body” (line 23) suits her well. But Donaldson’s emendation engages in possibility, not certainty, and highlights the provisional nature of Chaucer’s text.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Though its meaning is unknown, the word is probably a scribal mistake or a garbling by the speaker of a philosophical or legal term.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *listen* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *everyone* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *excellent* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *occasion* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *said* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *promise before* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *expert knowledge* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bless me* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *is wrong with* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *listen to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *piece of preaching, sermon* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preach* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *interpret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scatter tares (weeds)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wheat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *notify* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at the start* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strange* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gullet* [Return to reference](#) °

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale



The Wife of Bath. Illumination from the Ellesmere Manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1400–1405. Note the whip and the spurs.

In creating the Wife of Bath, Chaucer drew upon a centuries-old tradition of misogynist writing. This tradition held that by nature men were more rational and more spiritual, whereas women were irrational, morally weak, and dominated by material forces. These ideas had their basis in Greco-Roman thought, but Christian

authorities modified and elaborated them over the history of the Church. Medieval misogyny was often bound up with the denigration of marriage. The apostle Paul and the early Church Fathers had celebrated celibacy and virginity. In the fourth century, a monk named Jovinian apparently wrote a treatise presenting marriage as a positive good, although Jovinian's work is known only through St. Jerome's fanatical diatribe against it, a barrage of claims maligning both women and matrimony. Jerome's work remained in wide circulation in Chaucer's day, and it serves as one of the main sources of bookish male "auctoritee" (authority), against which the Wife of Bath asserts her female "experience" and defends her life as a five-time married woman. The valorization of virginity and masculine spiritual authority remained important in Chaucer's day. All monks and clerics were supposed to be celibate, so celibacy was (at least in theory) a central qualification for an entire class of society.

It is a remarkable aspect of the Wife that even as she seems to confirm misogyny's ugliest accusations—that women are materialist, dishonest, and sexually voracious—she also succeeds in showing the blinkered prejudice and violence of this patriarchal system. Readers are invited to admire her cleverness and ferocity, even as we might laughingly pity her first three husbands. Stereotype flips over into critique. A number of twenty-first-century feminist writers—including Jean "Binta" Breeze (b. 1956), Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962), Patience Agbabi (b. 1965), and Zadie Smith (b. 1975)—have found inspiration in reanimating the Wife of Bath in their own works. (For Chaucer-inspired works by Bergvall and Agbabi, see volume F of this anthology.)

As we suggested in the headnote to *The Man of Law's Epilogue*, Chaucer may have originally written the fabliau that became *The Shipman's Tale* for the Wife of Bath. If so, he later replaced it with a different tale, one that is not simply appropriate to her character but that gives further expression to the complexity of her personality. The story is a romance (on the romance genre, see [pp. 141–42](#)). The plot survives in two other versions, in which the knightly protagonist is a much more admirable figure than he is in the Wife's telling. As Chaucer has the Wife recount it, the tale expresses her views about

the relations between the sexes, her wit and humor, and her fantasies. Like Marie de France's lay *Lanval* (see [pp. 171–84](#)), the Wife's tale is about a fairy bride who seeks out and tests a mortal lover.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, is right enough for me¹
To speak of woe that is in mariage:
For lordinges,^o sith^o I twelve years was of age²—
Thanked be God that is eterne on live^o—
5 Husbondes at chirche door³ I have had five
 (If I so ofte might have wedded be),
 And alle were worthy men in their degree.^o
 But me was told, certayn, not long agon^o is,
 That sith^o that Christ ne wente never but ones^o
10 To wedding in the Cane^o of Galilee,⁴
 That by the same example taught he me
 That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.^o
 Herke eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,⁵
 Beside a welle, Jesus, God and man,
15 Spoke in repreve^o of the Samaritan:
 "Thou hast yhad five husbondes," quod^o he,
 "And that ilke^o man that now hath thee
 Is not thyn husbonde." Thus said he certayn.^o
 What that he meant thereby I can not sayn,
20 But that I axe^o why that the fifthe man
 Was none^o husbonde to the Samaritan?⁶
 How manye mighte she have in mariage?
 Yet heard I never tellen in mine age
 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.^o
25 Men may divine^o and glosen^o up and doun,
 But well I woot,^o express,^o withouten lie,
 God bade us for to wax^o and multiply:
 That gentil text⁷ can I well understonde.
 Eek^o well I woot^o he saide mine husbonde
30 Sholde lete^o father and mother and take to me,
 But of no nombre mencion made he—

Of bigamy or of octogamy:⁸
 Why sholde men thanne speak of it vileiny?^o
 Lo, here the wise king daun^o Salomon:
 35 I trowe^o he hadde wives many one,⁹
 As wolde God it leueful^o were to me
 To be refreshed half so oft as he.
 Which gift^o of God had he for all his wives!
 No man hath such that in this world alive is.
 40 God woot^o this noble king, as to my wit,
 The firste night had many a merrye fit^o
 With each of them, so well was him on live.^o
 Blessed be God that I have wedded five,
 Of whiche I have picked out the best,¹
 44a Both of their nether purs^o and of their chest.^o
 Diverse scoles^o maken parfit^o clerkes,
 And diverse practikes^o in sondry^o werkes
 Maken the workman parfit sikerly:^o
 Of five husbondes scoleying^o am I.²
 44f Welcome the sixte when that ever he shall,^o
 45 Forsoothe, I will not keepe me chaste in all:
 When mine husbonde is from the world ygon,
 Some Christian man shall wedde me anon.
 For thanne th' Apostle^o saith that I am free
 To wedde, a Goddes half, where liketh me.³
 50 He said that to be wedded is no sinne:
 Bet^o is to be wedded than to brinne.^{o 4}
 What rekketh me^o though folk saye vileinye
 Of shrewed^o Lamech⁵ and his bigamy?
 I woot well Abraham was an holy man,
 55 And Jacob eek,^o as fer as ever I can,^o
 And each of them hadde wives more than two,
 And many another holy man also.
 Where can ye say in any manere age
 That hye God defended^o mariage
 60 By express word?^o I pray you, telleth me.

Or where comanded he virginitee?
I woot as well as ye, it is no drede,^o
Th' Apostle, when he speketh of maidenhede,^o
He saide that precept therof had he none:⁶
65 Men may conseile a woman to be one,^o
But conseiling is no comandement.
He put it in our owene juggement.
For hadde God commanded maidenhede,
70 Thanne had he dampned^o wedding with the deede;⁷
And certes,^o if there were no seed ysowe,^o
Virginitee, thanne whereof should it grow?
Paul dorste^o not commanden at the leeste
A thing of which his master gave no heeste.⁸
75 The dart^o is set up^o for virginitee:⁹
Cacche^o whoso may, who renneth^o best let see.
But this word is not take of every wight,^o
But thereas God list^o give it of his might.
I woot^o well that th' Apostle was a maide,^o
80 But nathelees,^o though that he wrote or saide
He wolde^o that every wight^o were such as he,
All nis but conseil^o to virginitee.
And for to been a wife he gave me leve
Of indulgence;¹ so is it no reprove^o
85 To wedde me if that my make^o die,
Withouten excepcioun of^o bigamy—
Al were it^o good no woman for to touche²
(He meant as in his bed or in his couche,
For peril is bothe fire and tow^o t'assemble—
Ye knowe what this ensample^o may resemble^o).
90 This all and some:^o he held virginitee
More parfit^o than wedding in freletee^o
(Freletee clepe I but if^o that he and she
Wolde leden all their life in chastity).
I graunte it well, I have none envy
95 Though maidenhede preferre bigamy:³

It liketh them to be clean in body and ghost.^o
 Of mine estate ne will I make no boast;
 For well ye know, a lord in his household
 Ne hath not every vessel all of gold:
 100 Some been of tree^o and doon their lord servise.⁴
 God clepeth^o folk to him in sondry wise,^o
 And everich hath of God a propre gift,
 Some this, some that, as him liketh shift.^o
 105 Virginitie is great perfeccioun,
 And continence^o eek^o with devocioun,
 But Christ, that of perfeccion is well,^o
 Bade not every wight^o he sholde go sell
 All that he had and give it to the poor,
 And in such wise^o folwe^o him and his fore:^{o5}
 110 He spoke to them that wolde live parfitly^o—
 And lordinges, by youre leve, that am not I.
 I will bistowe the flower of all mine age^o
 In th'actes and in fruit of mariage.
 115 Telle me also, to what conclusioun^o
 Were membres made of generacioun^o
 And of so parfit wise a wrighte ywroght?⁶
 Trusteth right well, they were not made for noght.
 Glose^o whoso will, and saye both up and down
 That they were maked for purgacioun
 120 Of urine, and oure bothe thinges smale
 Were eek^o to know a female from a male,
 And for none other cause—say ye no?
 Th'experience woot^o well it is not so.
 So that^o the clerkes be not with me wroth^o
 125 I saye this, that they maked been for both—
 That is to say, for office^o and for ease
 Of engendrure,^o there^o we not God displease.
 Why sholde men elles^o in their bookes set
 130 That man shall yelde^o to his wife her debt?⁷
 Now wherewith should he make his payement

If he ne used his sely instrument?°
 Thanne were they made upon a creature
 To purge urine, and eek° for engendrure.°
 But I saye not that every wight° is hold,°
 135 That hath such harneis° as I to you told,
 To goon and usen them in engendrure:
 Thanne sholde men take of chastity no cure.°
 Christ was a maid° and shapen as° a man,
 And many a saint sith° that the world began,
 140 Yet lived they ever in parfit° chastity.
 I nil° envy no virginity:
 Let them be bread of pured° whete seed,
 And let us wives hote° barley breed°—
 And yet with barley breed, Mark telle can,
 145 Oure Lord Jesus refreshed many a man.⁸
 In such estate as God hath cleped us
 I will persevere; I am not precious.°
 In wifhode will I use mine instrument
 As freely° as my Maker hath it sent.
 150 If I be daungerous,°⁹ God give me sorwe:
 Mine husbonde shall it have both eve and morwe,°
 When that him list° come forth and paye his debt.

 An husbonde will I have, I will not let,°
 Which shall be bothe my debtor and my thrall,°
 155 And have his tribulation withal°
 Upon his flesh while that I am his wife.
 I have the power during all my life
 Upon his propre° body, and not he:
 Right thus th' Apostle tolde it unto me,
 160 And bade our husbondes for to love us well.¹
 All this sentence° me liketh everydel.°

AN INTERLUDE

Up sterte^o the Pardoner and that anon:^o
 "Now dame," quod^o he, "by God and by Saint John,
 Ye been a noble preacher in this cas.²
 165 I was aboute to wed a wif; alas,
 What^o should I buy^o it on my flesh so dear?
 Yet had I levere^o wedde no wife toyear."^o
 "Abide," quod she, "my tale is not bigonne.^o
 Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tonne,^o
 170 Er^o that I go, shall savoure^o worse than ale.
 And when that I have told thee forth my tale
 Of tribulacioun in mariage,
 Of which I am expert in all mine age—
 This is to saye, myself hath been the whip—
 175 Thanne maistou chese^o wheither thou wolt sip
 Of thilke^o tonne that I shall abroach:^o
 Beware of it, er^o thou too neigh^o approach,
 For I shall tell ensamples^o more than ten.³
 'Whoso that nil beware^o by othere men,
 180 By him shall othere men corrected be.'
 These same wordes writeth Ptolomee:
 Read in his Almageste and take it there."⁴
 "Dame, I wolde pray you if youre will it were,"
 Saide this Pardoner, "as ye began,
 185 Telle forth youre tale; spareth^o for no man,
 And teach us yonge men of youre practike."^o
 "Gladly," quod^o she, "sith^o it may you like;^o
 But that I praye to all this compaigny,
 If that I speak after my fantasy,^o
 190 As taketh not agrief^o of that I say,
 For mine entente nis but for^o to play."

THE WIFE CONTINUES

Now sire, thanne will I telle you forth my tale.
 As ever might I drinke wine or ale,

195 I shall saye sooth: o tho o husbondes that I had,
 As three of them were good, and two were bad.
 The three men were good, and rich, and old;
 Unnethe o mighte they the statute hold 5
 In which they were bounden unto me—
 Ye woot o well what I mean of this, pardee. o
 200 As help me God, I laughe when I think
 How pitously o anight o I made them swink; o
 And by my faith, I told of it no stoor: o
 They hadde me given their land and their tresoor; 6
 Me needed not do longer diligence
 205 To winne their love or doon them reverence.
 They loved me so well, by God above,
 That I ne tolde no daintee of o their love.
 A wise woman will bisye her ever in one o
 To get their love, ye, thereas she hath none.
 210 But sith o I hadde them wholly in mine hand,
 And sith that they hadde given me all their land,
 What o sholde I take keep o them for to please,
 But o it were for my profit and mine ease?
 I set them so awerke, o by my fay, o
 215 That many a night they songen 'wailaway.' o
 The bacon was not fet o for them, I trowe, o
 That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe. 7
 I governed them so well after o my law
 That each of them full blissful was and fawe o
 220 To bringe me gaye thinges from the fair;
 They were full glade when I spoke to them fair, o
 For God it woot, o I chidde o them spitously. o
 Now herkneth o how I bore me o proprely:
 Ye wise wives, that can understand,
 225 Thus sholde ye speak and bear then wrong on hand o
 —
 For half so boldely can there no man
 Swear and lie as a woman can.

I saye not this by wives that been wise,
 But if it be^o when they them misavise.^o
 230 A wise wife, if that she can her good,^o
 Shall bear him on hande^o the cow^o is wood,⁸
 And take witness of^o her owene maide
 Of her assent.^o But herkneth^o how I saide:
 "Sir olde cainard,^o is this thine array?^o
 235 Why is my neighebores wife so gay?
 She is honoured overal there^o she gooth:
 I sit at home; I have no thrifty cloth.^o
 What dostou^o at my neighebores hous?
 Is she so fair? Artou^o so amorous?
 240 What roun^o ye with oure maide, *benedicite?*^o
 Sir olde lechour, let thy japes be.^o
 And if I have a gossib^o or a friend,
 Withouten guilt ye chiden^o as^o a fiend,
 If that I walk or play unto his house.
 245 Thou comest home as dronken as a mouse,
 And preachest on thy bench, with evil preef!^o
 Thou saist to me, it is a great mischief^o
 To wed a povre^o woman, for costage.^o
 And if that she be rich, of high parage,^o
 250 Thanne saistou^o that it is a tormentrye
 To suffer her pride and her malencolye.^o
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,^o
 Thou saist that every holour^o will her have;
 She may no while in chastity abide
 255 That^o is assailed upon each a side.
 "Thou saist some folk desiren us for richesse,
 Some for oure shape, and some for oure fairnesse,
 And some for^o she can outh^o sing or daunce,
 And some for gentillesse^o and daliaunce,^o
 260 Some for her handes and her armes smale—
 Thus gooth all to the devil by thy tale!^o
 Thou saist men may not keep^o a castle wall,

It may so long assailed been overal.^o
 And if that she be foul, thou saist that she
 265 Coveiteth^o every man that she may see;
 For as a spaniel she will on him leap,
 Til that she finde some man hire^o to cheap.^o
 Ne none so grey goose gooth there in the lake,
 As, saistou,^o will be withoute make;^o
 270 And saist it is an hard thing for to welde^o
 A thing that no man will, his thanks, helde.^o
 Thus saistou,^o lorel,^o when thou goost to bed,
 And that no wise man needeth for to wed,
 Ne no man that entendeth unto^o hevене.
 275 With wilde thonder-dint^o and firy levене^o
 Mote^o thy welked nekke^o be tobroke!^o
 Thou saist that dropping^o houses and eek^o smoke
 And chiding wives maken men to flee
 Out of their owen houses:⁹ a, *benedicite*,^o
 280 What aileth such an old man for to chide?
 Thou saist we wives will oure vices hide
 Til we be fast,^o and thanne we will them shewe—
 Well may that be a proverb of a shrewe!^o
 Thou saist that oxen, asses, hors,^o and houndes,
 285 They been assayed^o at diverse stoundes;^o
 Basins, lavours,^o er^o that men them bye,^o
 Spooones, stooles, and all such husbandrye,^o
 And so be pottes, clothes, and array^o—
 But folk of wives maken none assay^o
 290 Til they be wedded—olde dotard shrewe!^o
 And thanne, saistou, we will oure vices shewe.
 Thou saist also that it displeaseth me
 But if^o that thou wolt praise my beautee,
 And but thou poure always upon my face,¹
 295 And clepe^o me 'Faire Dame' in every place,
 And but thou make a feast on thilke^o day
 That I was born, and make me fresh and gay,

And but thou do to my norice^o honour,
 And to my chamberere^o within my bour,^o
 300 And to my fadres folk, and his allies^o—
 Thus saistou,^o olde barrel-ful of lies.^o
 And yet of our apprentice Janekin,
 For his crisp^o hair, shining as gold so fin,^o
 305 And for he squiereth me both up and down,²
 Yet hastou^o caught a false suspecious:
 I will him not^o though thou were dead tomorwe.
 "But tell me this, why hidestou,^o
 with sorwe,^o
 The keyes of thy chest^o away from me?
 It is my good^o as well as thyn, pardee.^o
 310 What, weenestou^o make an idiot of oure
 dame?^o
 Now by that lord that called is Saint Jame,³
 Thou shalt not bothe, though that^o thou were
 wood,^o
 Be master of my body and of my good:^o
 That one thou shalt forgo, maugree thine eyen.^o
 315 "What helpeth it of me inquire and spyen?⁴
 I trowe^o thou woldest loke^o me in thy chest.
 Thou sholdest saye, 'Wife, go where thee lest.^o
 Take youre disport.^o I nil leve no^o tales:
 I knowe you for a trewe wife, dame Alis.'
 320 We love no man that taketh keep or charge^o
 Where that we goon: we will been at oure large.^o
 Of alle men yblessed mote^o he be
 The wise astrologen^o daun Ptolomee,^o
 That saith this proverb in his Almageste:^o
 325 'Of alle men his wisdom is the hyste^o
 That rekketh nat^o who hath the world in
 hand.'^o
 By this proverbe thou shalt understand,
 Have thou^o enough, what thar^o thee

rekke^o or care
 How merrily that othere folkes fare?
 330 For certes, olde dotard, by youre leave,
 Ye shall have queinte right enough^o at eve:
 He is too great a nigard^o that will werne^o
 A man to light a candle at his lanterne;
 He shall have never the lasse^o lighte, pardee.
 335 Have thou enough, thee thar not plaine thee.^o
 "Thou saist also that if we make us gay
 With clothing and with precious array,
 That it is peril of oure chastitee,
 And yet, with sorwe, thou must enforce thee,^o
 340 And saye these wordes⁵ in th'Apostles name:
 'In habit^o made with chastitee and shame
 Ye women shall apparaile^o you,' quod^o he,
 'And not in tressed hair and gay perree,^o
 As perles ne with gold ne clothes riche.'
 345 After^o thy text, ne after thy rubriche,^o
 I will not work as muchel^o as a gnat.^o
 Thou saidest this, that I was like a cat:
 For whoso wolde singe^o a cattles skin,
 Thanne wolde the cat well dwellen in his inn;^o
 350 And^o if the cattles skin be silk^o and gay,
 She will not dwell in house half a day,
 But forth she will, er^o any day be dawed,^o
 To show her skin and goon a-caterwawed.^o
 This is to say, if I be gay, sire shrewe,^o
 355 I will renne^o out, my borel^o for to shewe.
 Sir olde fool, what helpeth thee t'espyen?
 Though thou pray^o Argus⁶ with his hundred eyen^o
 To be my wardecors,^o as he can best,
 In faith, he shall not keepe me but me lest:^o
 360 Yet could I make his berd,^o so mote I thee.^o
 "Thou saidest eek^o that there been thinges three,
 The whiche things troublen all this earth,

And that no wight may endure the ferth.^o
 O leve^o sire shrewe, Jesus shorte^o thy life!
 365 Yet prechestou^o and saist an hateful wife
 Yrekened^o is for one of these meschaunces.^o
 Been^o there not none othere resemblaunces^o
 That ye may likne^o youre parables^o to,
 But if^o a sely^o wife be one of tho?^o
 370 "Thou liknest^o eek^o womanes love to hell,
 To bareine^o land there water may not dwell;
 Thou liknest it also to wilde fire—
 The more it brenneth,^o the more it hath desire
 To consumen every thing that brent^o will be;
 375 Thou saist, right as wormes shende^o a tree,
 Right so a wife destroyeth her husbonde⁷—
 This knownen they that been to wives bonde."^o
 Lordinges, right thus, as ye han understonde,
 380 Bore I stiffly mine old husbandes on honde⁸
 That thus they saiden in their drunkeness—
 And all was false, but that^o I took witness
 On Janekin and on my niece also.
 O Lord, the pain I did them and the woe,
 Ful giltelees,^o by Goddes sweete pine!^o
 385 For as an horse I coude bite and whine;^o
 I coude plaine,^o and yet was in the gilt,^o
 Or elles often time I hadde been spilt.^o
 Whoso that first to mille comth first grint.^o
 I plained^o first; so was oure werre stint.^o
 390 They were full glad to excusen them full blive^o
 Of thing of which they never agilte their live.^o
 Of wenches^o would I beren them on hand,^o
 When that for sick^o they might unnethe^o stand,
 Yet tickled I his herte for that he
 395 Wende^o that I had of him so great chiertee.^o
 I swore that all my walking out by night
 Was for to espye wenches that he dight.^o

Under that colour^o had I many a mirth.^o
 For all such wit is given us in oure birth:
 400 Deceite, weeping, spinning God hath give
 To women kindly^o while they may live.
 And thus of one thing I avaunte me:^o
 At end^o I had the bet^o in each degree,
 By sleight^o or force, or by some manere thing,
 405 As by continuel murmur or grucching.^o
 Namely abedde^o hadden they meschaunce:^o
 There would I chide and do them no plesaunce;
 I wolde no longer in the bed abide
 If that I felt his arm over my side,
 410 Til he hadde made his raunson^o unto me;
 Thanne would I suffer^o him do his nicetee.^o
 And therefore every man this tale I tell:
 Winne whoso may, for all is for to sell;
 With empty hand men may no hawkes lure.⁹
 415 For winning^o would I all his lust endure,
 And make me a feigned appetite—
 And yet in bacon^o had I never delight.
 That made me that ever I would them chide;
 For though the Pope hadde seten^o them beside,
 420 I wolde not spare them at their owene bord.^o
 For by my troth, I quitte^o them word for word.
 As help me verray^o God omnipotent,
 Though I right now sholde make my testament,^o
 I ne owe them not a word that it nis quit.^o
 425 I brought it so aboute by my wit
 That they moste^o give it up as for the best,
 Or elles hadde we never been in rest;
 For though he looked as a wood leoun,^o
 Yet should he fail of his conclusioun.^o
 430 Thanne would I saye, "Goodelief,^o take keep,^o
 How meekely looketh Wilekin, oure sheep!
 Come near my spouse, let me ba^o thy cheek—

Ye sholden be all patient and meek,
 And have a sweete-spiced^o conscience,
 435 Sith^o ye so preach of Jobes^o patience;
 Suffreth^o always, sin^o ye so well can preach;
 And but^o ye do, certayn, we shall you teach
 That it is fair to have a wife in pees.^o
 One of us two moste bowen,^o doutelees,
 440 And sith^o a man is more reasonable
 Than woman is, ye mosten^o been suffrable.^o
 What aileth you to grucche^o thus and groan?
 Is it for^o ye would have my queinte¹ alone?
 Why, take it all—lo, have it everydel.^o
 445 Peter, I shrewe^o you but^o ye love it well.
 For if I wolde selle my *bele chose*, ^o
 I coude walk as fresh as is a rose;
 But I will keep it for your owene tooth.^o
 Ye be to blame. By God, I say you sooth!"^o
 450 Swiche manere wordes hadde we on honde.
 Now will I speak of my fourth husbonde.
 My fourth husbonde was a revelour^o—
 This is to say, he had a paramour^o—
 And I was young and full of ragerye,^o
 455 Stubborn and strong and jolly as a pie:^o
 How could I dance to an harpe smale,
 And singe, ywis,^o as any nightingale
 When I hadde drunk a draught^o of sweete wine.
 Metellius, the foule cherl, the swine,
 460 That with a staff biraft^o his wife her life
 For^o she drank wine,² though I had been his wife,
 Ne sholde not have daunted^o me from drink;
 And after wine on Venus^o must I think,
 For also siker^o as cold engendreth hail,
 465 A likerous^o mouth must have a likerous tail:
 In women vinolent^o is no defence—
 This knowen lechours by experience.

But Lord Christ, when that it remembreth me^o
 Upon my youth and on my jolitee,^o
 470 It tickleth me aboute mine herte roote—
 Unto this day it dooth mine herte boote^o
 That I have had my world as in my time.
 But age, alas, that all will envenime,^o
 475 Hath me biraft^o my beautee and my pith^o ³—
 Let go, farewell, the devil go therewith!
 The flour is gone, there is no more to tell:
 The bran as I best can now must I sell;
 But yet to be right merrie will I fonde.^o
 480 Now will I tellen of my fourth husbonde.
 I say I had in herte great despite^o
 That he of any other had delight,
 But he was quit,^o by God and by Saint Joce:⁴
 I made him of the same wood a croce^o—
 485 Not of my body in no foul manere—
 But, certainly, I made folk such cheere^o
 That in his owene grease I made him frye,
 For angre and for verray^o jealousy.
 By God, in earth I was his purgatory,⁵
 For which I hope his soule be in glory.
 490 For God it woot,^o he sat full ofte and song^o
 When that his shoe full bitterly him wrong.^o
 There was no wight^o save God and he that wiste^o
 In many wise how sore^o I him twiste.^o
 He deide^o when I came from Jerusalem,
 495 And lith ygrave^o under the roode-beam,⁶
 Al^o is his tombe not so curious^o
 As was the sepulcre^o of him, Darius,
 Which that Appelles wroghte subtilly:^{o7}
 500 It nis but waste^o to bury him preciously.^o
 Let him fare well,^o God give his soule rest;
 He is now in his grave and in his chest.^o
 Now of my fifth husbonde will I tell—

God let his soule never come in hell—
 And yet he was to me the moste shrewe:°
 505 That feel I on my ribbes all by rewe,°
 And ever shall unto mine ending day.
 But in oure bed he was so fresh and gay,
 And therewithal so well could he me glose°
 When that he would have my *bele chose*
 510 That, though he hadde me bet° on every boon,°
 He coude win again° my love anon.°
 I trowe° I loved him best for that° he
 Was of his love daungerous° to me.
 We women have, if that I shall not lie,
 515 In this matter a quainte° fantasye:
 Waite° what° thing we may not lightly° have,
 Thereafter will we cry all day and crave;
 Forbid us thing, and that desiren we;
 Press on us faste,° and thanne will we flee.
 520 With daunger oute we all oure chaffare:°
 Great press° at market maketh deare ware,°
 And too great cheap° is holden at litel price.°
 This knoweth every woman that is wise.
 My fifth husbonde—God his soule bless!—
 525 Which that I took for love and no richness,
 He sometime was a clerk of Oxenford,
 And hadde left school and went at home to board°
 With my gossib,° dwelling in oure toun—
 God have her soule!—her name was Alisoun;
 530 She knew mine herte, and eek° my privetee,°
 Bet° than oure parish priest, as mote I thee.°
 To hire° biwrayed° I my conseil° all,
 For hadde mine husbonde pissed on a wall,
 Or done a thing that should have cost his life,
 535 To her, and to another worthy wife,
 And to my niece which that I loved well,
 I would have told his conseil everydel;°

And so I dide full often, God it woot,^o
 That made his face often red and hoot^o
 540 For verray^o shame, and blamed himself for he
 Hadde told to me so great a privetee.^o
 And so befell that once in a Lent⁹—
 So often times I to my gossib^o went,
 For ever yet I loved to be gay,
 545 And for to walk in March, Averill,^o and May,
 From house to house, to heare sondry tales—
 That Jankin clerk and my gossib dame Alis
 And I myself into the fieldes went.
 Mine husbonde was at London all that Lent:
 550 I hadde the better leiser^o for to play,
 And for to see, and eek^o for to be seye^o
 Of lusty^o folk—what wiste I^o where my
 grace^o
 Was shapen^o for to be, or in what place?
 Therefore I made my visitaciouns^o
 555 To vigilies¹ and to processiouns,
 To preaching eek, and to these pilgrimages,
 To playes of miracles^o and to mariages,^o
 And wered upon my gaye scarlet gites^o—
 These wormes ne these mothes ne these mites,^o
 560 Upon my peril, frete^o them neveradel:
 And woostou^o why? For^o they were used well.
 Now will I tellen forth what happed^o me.
 I saye that in the fieldes walked we,
 Til trewely we hadde such daliaunce,^o
 565 This clerk and I, that of my purveyaunce^o
 I spoke to him and said him how that he,
 If I were widwe,^o sholde wedde me.
 For certaynly, I saye for no bobaunce^o
 Yet was I never withouten purveyaunce
 570 Of mariage—n'of othere thinges eek.^o
 I holde a mouses herte not worth a leek^o

That hath but one hole for to stertere^o to,
 And if that faile thanne is all ydo.^o
 I bore him on hand^o he hadde enchaunted me
 575 (My dame^o taughte me that subtiltee^o),
 And eek^o I said I mette^o of him all night:
 He would have slain me as I lay upright,^o
 And all my bed was full of verray blood—
 “But yet I hope that ye shall do me good;
 580 For blood bitokeneth^o gold, as me was taught.”
 And all was false, I dreamed of it right not,
 But as I folwed ay^o my dames lore^o
 As well of that as of othere thinges more.
 But now sire—let me see, what shall I sayn?
 585 Aha, by God, I have my tale again.
 When that my fourth husbonde was on beere,^o
 I weep algate,^o and made sorry cheere,^o
 As wives moten,^o for it is usage,^o
 And with my coverchief^o covered my visage;
 590 But for that^o I was purveyed of a make,^o
 I wepte but small, and that I undertake.^o
 To chirche was mine husbonde born^o amorwe^o
 With neighebores that for him maden sorwe,
 And Jankin, oure clerk, was one of tho.^o
 595 As help me God, when that I saw him go
 After the beere,^o me thought he had a pair
 Of legges and of feet so clean^o and fair,
 That all mine heart I gave unto his hold.^o
 He was, I trowe,^o twenty winter old,
 600 And I was fourty, if I shall saye sooth^o—
 But yet I had always a coltes tooth:^o
 Gat-toothed² I was, and that became^o me weel;
 I had the print of Sainte Venus seal.³
 As help me God, I was a lusty oon,^o
 605 And fair and rich and young and wel-bigoon,^o
 And trewely, as mine husbandes tolde me,

I hadde the beste *quoniam*⁴ mighte be.
 For certes^o I am all Venerien^o
 In feeling, and mine herte is Marcien:⁵
 610 Venus me gave my lust, my likerousnesse,^o
 And Mars gave me my sturdy hardinesse.^o
 Mine ascendent^o was Taur^o and Mars therein—
 Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
 I folwed ay^o my inclinacioun
 615 By virtue of my constellacioun;^o
 That made me I coude not withdrawe
 My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.^o
 Yet have I Martes^o mark upon my face,
 And also in another privee^o place.
 620 For God so wise be my savacioun,^o
 I loved never by no discrecioun,^o
 But ever folwede mine appetite,
 Al^o were he short or long or black or white;
 I took no keep,^o so that he liked^o me,
 625 How povre^o he was, ne eek^o of what degree.
 What should I saye but at the monthes ende
 This jolly clerk Jankin, that was so hende^o
 Hath wedded me with great solempnitee,^o
 And to him gave I all the land and fee^o
 630 That ever was me given there before—
 But afterward repented me^o full sore:^o
 He nolde suffer^o nothing of my list.^o
 By God, he smote^o me once on the list^o
 For that^o I rente^o out of his book a leaf,^o
 635 That of the stroke mine ear wex^o all deaf.
 Stubborn^o I was as is a lioness,
 And of my tonge a verray jangleress,^o
 And walk I would, as I hadde done biforn,^o
 From house to house, although he had it sworn;⁶
 640 For which he often times wolde preach,
 And me of olde Roman geestes^o teach,

How he Simplicius Gallus left his wife,
 And hire^o forsook for term of all his life,
 Not but for open-heveded he hire sey⁷
 645 Looking out at his door upon a day.
 Another Roman told he me by name
 That, for^o his wife was at a someres^o game⁸
 Withouten his witing,^o he forsook her eke;^o
 And thanne would he upon his Bible seeke
 650 That ilke^o proverb of Ecclesiast^o
 Where he commandeth and forbiddeth fast
 Man shall not suffer^o his wife go roule^o about.⁹
 Thanne would he saye right thus withouten doubt:
 "Whoso that buildeth his house all of salwes,^o
 655 And priketh^o his blind horse over the falwes,^o
 And suffreth^o his wife to go seeken halwes,^o
 Is worthy to be hanged on the galwes."^o
 But all for not—I sette not an hawe¹
 Of his proverbes n'of his olde sawe;^o
 660 N'I wolde not of him corrected be:
 I hate him that my vices telleth me,
 And so do more, God woot,^o of us than I.
 This made him with me wood all outrelly:^o
 I nolde not forbere him in no cas.²
 665 Now will I say you sooth, by Saint Thomas,
 Why that I rent^o out of his book a leaf,
 For which he smote me so that I was deaf.
 He had a book that gladly night and day
 For his disport he wolde read always;
 670 He cleped^o it Valerie and Theofrast,³
 At which book he lough^o always full fast;^o
 And eek^o there was sometime a clerk at Rome,
 A cardinal, that highte^o Saint Jerome,
 That made a book against Jovinian;⁴
 675 In which book eek there was Tertulan,⁵
 Crysippus, Trotula, and Helowis,⁶

That was abbess not far from Paris;
And eek the Parables of Salomon,⁷
Ovides Art,⁸ and bookes many oon^o—
680 And alle these were bounden in one volume.
And every night and day was his custume,^o
When he hadde leiser^o and vacacioun^o
From other worldly occupacioun,
To reden in this book of wicked wives.
685 He knew of them more legendes and lives
Than been of goode wives in the Bible.
For trusteth well, it is an impossible^o
That any clerk will speke good of wives,
But if^o it be of holy saintes lives,
690 Ne of none other woman never the mo^o—
Who paintede the leoun, tell me who?⁹
By God, if women hadden written stories,
As clerkes have within their oratories,^o
They would have written of men more wickedness
695 Than all the merk^o of Adam may redress.
The children of Mercury and Venus¹
Been in their werking^o full contrarious:^o
Mercurye loveth wisdom and science,
And Venus loveth riot^o and dispence;^o
700 And for their diverse disposicioun
Each falleth in otheres exaltacioun,^{o2}
And thus, God woot,^o Mercury is desolat^o
In Pisces where Venus is exaltat,^o
And Venus falleth there^o Mercurye is raised:
705 Therefore no woman of^o no clerk is praised.
The clerk, when he is old and may not do^o
Of Venus werkes^o worth his olde shoe,
Thanne sits he down and writes in his dotage^o
That women can not keep their mariage.^o
710 But now to purpose^o why I tolde thee
That I was beaten for a book, pardee:^o

Upon a night Jankin, that was oure sire,^o
 Read on his book, as he sat by the fire,
 Of Eva first, that for her wickedness
 715 Was all mankinde brought to wrecchedness,
 For which that Jesus Christ himself was slain
 That bought^o us with his herte blood again—
 Lo, here express^o of women may ye find
 That woman was the loss^o of all mankind.
 720 Tho^o read he me how Sampson lost his heres:^o
 Sleeping his lemman^o cut it with her sheres,^o
 Thurgh^o which treason lost he both his eyen.³
 Tho read he me, if that I shall not lien,^o
 725 Of Ercules and of his Dianire,⁴
 That^o caused him to set himself afire.
 Nothing forgot he the sorwe and wo^o
 That Socrates hadde with his wives two—
 How Xantippa caste piss upon his head:⁵
 This sely^o man sat still as he were dead;
 730 He wiped his head, no more dorste^o he sayn
 But "Er^o that thonder stinte,^o comth a rain."
 Of Phasipha⁶ that was the queen of Crete—
 For shrewedness^o him thoughte the tale swete—
 735 Fy, speak no more, it is a grisly^o thing
 Of her horrible lust and her liking.^o
 Of Clytermistra⁷ for her lecherye
 That falsly made her husbande for to die,
 He read it with full good devocioun.
 He tolde me eek^o for what occasioun
 740 Amphiorax⁸ at Thebes lost his life:
 Mine husband had a legend of his wife
 Eriphylem, that for an ouche^o of gold
 Hath prively^o unto the Greekes told
 745 Where that her husband hid him in a place,
 For which he had at Thebes sorry grace.
 Of Livia tolde he me and of Lucie:⁹

They bothe made their husbandes for to die,
 That one for love, that other was for hate;
 Livia her husband on an even late^o
 750 Empoisoned^o hath for that^o she was his foe;
 Lucia, likerous,^o loved her husbände so
 That for^o he should always upon hire^o think,
 She gave him such a manere love-drink
 That he was dead er it were by the morwe.^o
 755 And thus algates^o husbandes have sorwe.^o
 Thanne told he me how one Latumius
 Complained unto his fellow Arrius
 That in his garden growed such a tree,
 On which he said how that his wives three
 760 Hanged themselves for herte despitous.^o
 "O leve^o brother," quod^o this Arrius,
 "Give me a plante^o of thilke^o blessed tree,
 And in my garden planted shall it be."¹
 Of latter date^o of wives hath he read
 765 That some have slain their husbandes in their bed
 And let her lechour^o dighte^o her all the night,
 When that the corpse lay on the floor upright;^o
 And some have driven nailes in their brain
 While that they sleep, and thus they have them
 770 slain;
 Some have them given poison in their drink.
 He spoke more harm than herte may bethink,^o
 And therewithal he knew of more proverbes
 Than in this world there growen grass or herbes:
 "Bet^o is," quod^o he, "thyn habitacioun
 775 Be with a leoun or a foul dragoun
 Than with a woman using for^o to chide.^o
 Bet is," quod he, "high in the roof abide^o
 Than with an angry wife down in the hous:
 They been so wicked^o and contrarious,^o
 780 They haten^o that^o their husbandes loveth ay."^o

He said, "A woman casts her shame^o away
 When she casts off her smock,"^o and furthermo,
 "A fair woman, but^o she be chaste also,
 Is like a gold ring in a sowes^o nose."
 785 Who wolde weene,^o or who wolde suppose
 The woe that in mine herte was and pine?^o
 And when I saw he wolde never fine^o
 To reden^o on this cursed book all night,
 All suddenly three leaves^o have I plight^o
 790 Out of his book right as he read, and eke^o
 I with my fist so took^o him on the cheeke
 That in oure fire he fell backward adoun.
 And up he start as dooth a wood leoun,^o
 And with his fist he smote^o me on the head
 795 That^o on the floor I lay as^o I were dead.
 And when he saw how stille that I lay,
 He was aghast, and would have fled his way,
 Til atte last out of my swough I braid:^o
 "O hastou^o slain me, false thief?" I said,
 800 "And for my land thus hastou mordred^o me?
 Er^o I be dead yet will I kisse thee."
 And near he came and kneeled fair adoun,
 And saide, "Deare sister Alisoun,
 As help me God, I shall thee never smite.^o
 805 That I have done, it is thyself to wite.^o
 Forgive it me, and that I thee beseek."^o
 And yet eftsoones^o I hit him on the cheek,
 And saide, "Thief, thus muchel^o am I wreke.^o
 Now will I die: I may no longer speke."
 810 But at the laste, with muchel care and woe
 We fille accorded^o by us selven^o two.
 He gave me all the bridle in mine hand,
 To have the governance of house and land,
 And of his tongue and his hand also;
 815 And made him brenne^o his book anonright tho.^o
 And when that I hadde gotten unto me

By maistrye^o all the soverinetee,^o
And that he saide, "Mine owene trewe wife,
Do as thee lust^o the term of all thy life,
820 Keep thyn honour, and keep eek^o mine estate,"
After that day we hadde never debate.^o
God help me so, I was to him as kind
As any wife from Denmark unto Inde,^o
And also true, and so was he to me.
825 I praye to God that sits in majestee,
So bless his soule for his mercy dear.
Now will I saye my tale if ye will hear.

ANOTHER INTERRUPTION

The Frere^o lough^o when he had heard all this:
830 "Now dame," quod^o he, "so have I^o joy or bliss,
This is a long preamble of a tale."
And when the Somnour^o hearde the Frere gale,^o
"Lo," quod the Somnour, "Goddess armes two,
A frere will entremette him^o evermo!^o
Lo, goode men, a fly and eek a frere
835 Will fall in every dish and eek^o matere.^o
What spekestou^o of preambulacioun?
What, amble or trot or piss or go sit down!
Thou lettest^o oure disport^o in this manere."
"Ye, wolto^o so, sire Somnour?" quod the Frere.
840 "Now by my faith, I shall er^o that I go
Tell of a somnour such a tale or two
That all the folk shall laughen in this place."
"Now elles,^o Frere, I will beshrewe^o thy face,"
Quod this Somnour, "and I beshrewe me
845 But if I^o telle tales two or three
Of freres, er^o I come to Sidingborn,^o
That I shall make thyn herte for to morne^o—
For well I woot^o thy patience is gone."
Our Hoste cride, "Peace, and that anon!"^o
850 And saide, "Let the woman tell her tale:
Ye fare as^o folk that drunken been of ale.

Do, dame, tell forth youre tale, and that is best."
 "All ready, sire," quod she, "right as you lest^o—
 If I have licence of this worthy Frere."
 855 "Yes, dame," quod he, "tell forth and I will heare."^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: Even if there were no (textual) authority in this world, experience would serve me perfectly well.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Twelve (!) was the legal age of consent for women.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The actual wedding ceremony was celebrated at the church door, not in the chancel.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See John 2:1.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Listen, also, lo, what a sharp word for this purpose.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Christ was actually referring to a sixth man who was not married to the Samaritan woman (John 4:18).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Genesis 1:28.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, of two—or eight—marriages, entered into successively, not simultaneously. The word *octogamy* originates in the polemical tract *Against Jovinian* (393), by St. Jerome (ca. 347–420), which was much copied and imitated in medieval antifeminist writings.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: According to 1 Kings 11:3, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, whom I have cleaned out of everything worthwhile.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lines 44a–f are not in the most authoritative manuscripts and may represent an earlier draft by Chaucer, later omitted on revision.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In God's name, wherever it pleases me.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: 1 Corinthians 7:9. Many of the Wife's citations of Paul are from this chapter, often echoed by Jerome.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The first man whom the Bible mentions as having two wives, though he is cursed not on this account but for murder (Genesis 4:19–24).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: He had no precept concerning it (see 1 Corinthians 7:25).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: For if God had commanded virginity, (then) he would have condemned marriage at the same time (literally, "with the deed").[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A thing about which his master gave no command.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The image of a race comes from 1 Corinthians 9:24 and is echoed by Jerome: virginity wins first prize.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: As a concession. In 1 Corinthians 7:1–7, Paul expresses his personal preference for celibacy, but gives permission for men and women to marry "to avoid fornication." The Wife takes him at his word.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Takes precedence over remarriage.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The image is Jerome's, *Against Jovinian* 1.3. Again, the Wife enthusiastically takes it as a form of permission.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Matthew 19:21, cited by Jerome (1.34).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: And made by so perfectly wise a maker?—The question is attributed to Jovinian by Jerome (1.36).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Wife refers to the principle, from medieval canon law, of marital debt: each spouse owes a sexual obligation to the other.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: See Mark 6:38–44; 8:1–9, for the feeding of the five thousand; John 6:9 identifies the loaves as barley bread, which Jerome (*Against Jovinian* 1.7) compares to marriage, with

virginity taking pride of place as “pured whete seed.”[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: In romance, *dangerous* is a term applied to a woman who disdainfully rejects a lover. The Wife means that she will not withhold sexual favors.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: 1 Corinthians 7:3–4.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Contrary to Paul’s prohibition on women preaching and teaching, 1 Timothy 2:12.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: More than ten exemplary anecdotes in support.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *Almagest*, an astronomical treatise by the Egyptian scientist Ptolemy (active 127–148 C.E.), contains no such aphorism, but it does appear in a collection ascribed to Ptolemy.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: With difficulty could they discharge the marriage debt.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: As their dowry, in marriage (to be bequeathed on the husband’s death).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Dunmow flitch (a side of bacon) was awarded to a married couple that had not quarreled for a year.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The cowbird (which is supposed to tell husbands of their wives’ infidelity) has gone crazy (“wood”).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Proverbial (from Proverbs 27:15), quoted in Jerome’s *Against Jovinian* 1.26 and embellished in several late medieval texts.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: And unless you gaze constantly at my face.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: And because he escorts me everywhere.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: According to *The General Prologue* (line 465), the Wife’s pilgrimages included a visit to the shrine of St. James of Compostela in Galicia, Spain.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Why do you need to make inquiries about me?[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: See 1 Timothy 2:9. “The Apostle,” again, is St. Paul.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A figure in Greek mythology; Argos was set by Hera to watch over one of Zeus’s mistresses, but Hermes put his hundred eyes to sleep and killed him.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: For lines 371–77, see Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 1.28, which cites Proverbs 30:15–16 and 25:20.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: I strongly bore (false) witness against my old husbands.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Hawks are trained by means of a lure containing food.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Private parts.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Ellesmere manuscript has a marginal note giving the source of this story as *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, a book of exempla for rhetoricians by the Roman historian and moralist Valerius Maximus (active 30 C.E.).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The source here is La Vieille (the Old Woman) in the *Romance of the Rose*, lines 12902–12, to which Chaucer adds a powerful note of pathos.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: St. Judoc or Josse, a 7th-century Breton hermit: a relatively obscure saint but a useful rhyme.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: According to medieval Christian doctrine, purgatory was what the souls of sinners suffered after death in order to expiate their sins and enable them to enter heaven.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Rood-beam: timber between nave and chancel in a church, supporting a large crucifix, and beneath which wealthy parishioners were sometimes buried.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Ellesmere manuscript has a gloss referring to the *Alexandreis* (ca. 1180) by Walter of Châtillon, which recounts that the Greek craftsman Apelles made an elaborate tomb for Darius (ca. 550–486 B.C.E.), the Persian king.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: With reluctance we display all our merchandise.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Lent consists of forty days of repentance before Easter.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Devotional watches kept in church before a saint's day or other religious festival (and before funerals).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Gap-toothed women were considered to be amorous.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The print of Venus's seal is a metaphor for a birthmark.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "What's it"; a sexual euphemism.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Dominated by Mars (astrologically).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Even though he had forbidden it.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Only because he saw her bare-headed.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: On Midsummer Day (June 24), young people traditionally met in festivities.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Ecclesiasticus 25:25–26.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A hawthorn berry (that is, something of no value).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: I would not tolerate him under any circumstances.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Jankin's book seems to contain *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum* (ca. 1180–83, *The Advice of Valerius to Rufinus Not to Marry*), by the English churchman Walter Map and the antifeminist *Golden Book of Marriage*, attributed to the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (ca. 370–285 B.C.E.), and frequently quoted by Jerome in *Against Jovinian*. Medieval manuscripts often contained a number of different works, as here, dealing with similar subjects.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The antifeminist *Against Jovinian*, which (as previous notes make clear) acts as an important source for the Wife of Bath's Prologue; Jerome was a Latin Church Father but not a cardinal.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 240), Christian theologian and austere moralist who wrote treatises on sexual modesty.[Return](#)

[to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Héloïse (ca. 1098–1154), French religious whose love affair with and secret marriage to the great scholar Abelard was a medieval scandal; she later became abbess of a nunnery near Paris. Chrysippus (ca. 280–207 B.C.E.), Greek philosopher mentioned by Jerome as an antifeminist. “Trotula” refers to a 12th-century female Italian doctor, Trota, who wrote on women’s health and whose writings sometimes circulated in misogynist compilations.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the Bible’s book of Proverbs, attributed to Solomon.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: *The Art of Love* (*Ars amatoria*, ca. 1 B.C.E.), a long mock-didactic poem on the arts of seduction and sexual intrigue, by the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In one of Aesop’s fables, the lion, on being shown a picture of a man killing a lion, asked who had painted the picture and added that in a version painted by a lion, the lion would triumph—a picture by a man is not evidence that a man is more powerful.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Scholars were thought to be dominated by the planet Mercury; lovers, by the planet Venus.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Each planet loses its power when the other is dominant (in the zodiac).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Samson was betrayed by his lover Delilah to the Philistines, who put out his eyes (Judges 16).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Deianeira, Hercules’ wife, unwittingly gave him a poisoned shirt; dying and in agony, he committed suicide.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: There is a long tradition of portraying Xanthippe, the wife of the Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.), as a scold (as in Jerome’s *Against Jovinian* 1.48); the story of her pouring a chamber pot over his head was popular but without classical support.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Pasiphae, the wife of Minos; because he failed to sacrifice a bull to Poseidon, the god made her fall in love with it

- (their offspring was the Minotaur).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae; she and her lover Aegisthus conspired to kill him.[Return to reference 7](#)
 - Note 8: Amphiaraus, a seer who knew that the expedition against Thebes would fail; he was forced to go because his wife Eriphyle, given a gold necklace, betrayed him.[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: Lucilla, who according to literary tradition was the wife of the Roman poet Lucretius (ca. 94–55 B.C.E.), whom she poisoned with a love potion designed to keep him faithful. Livia, or Livilla, was suspected of poisoning her husband Drusus (d. 23 C.E.), the son of the emperor Tiberius, for the sake of her lover, Sejanus.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: This gruesome story is found in Walter Map's *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum*.[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *sirs* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *has eternal life* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *their class* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ago* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *once* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Cana* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *only once* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reproach* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *said* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *same* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ask* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *no* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *definition, limit* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *conjecture* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *interpret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *explicitly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *increase* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speak ill of it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *master* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lawful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *What a grace* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bout* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so well things went for him in life* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scrotum* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *possessions* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *schools* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perfect* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *practices* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *various* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *schooling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whenever he comes along* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(St. Paul)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do I care* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cursed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to the best of my knowledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prohibited* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *explicitly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virginity* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *single*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *damned*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sown*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dared*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prize (in a race)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *given*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *catch it* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *runs*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *applicable to every one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *where it pleases God to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *virgin*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *nonetheless*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wished* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *person*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *no more than advice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disgrace*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *partner*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *objection on grounds of*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *although it would be*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flax*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *metaphor* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *apply to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in sum*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *perfect* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *frailty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wood*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *calls* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *various ways*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ordain*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *self-restraint* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mainspring*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in such a way* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *follow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *footsteps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perfectly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prime of my life*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *end*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *genitals made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Theorize*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in order that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *angry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *function*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *procreation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in which*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *otherwise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *innocent tool*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *procreation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equipment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have no regard for chastity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virgin* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was shaped like*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perfect*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *refined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be called* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bread*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fastidious, fussy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *standoffish*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whenever it pleases him to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make impediment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *additionally*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *own*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases me wholly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *why* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I would rather* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *this year*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begun*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barrel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taste*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may you choose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that same* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *open*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *near*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *examples*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not be cautioned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stop*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *practices*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *please*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inclination*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amiss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is only*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *barely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pathetically* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at night* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toil* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set no store by it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set no value on* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *busy herself constantly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *why* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to work* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sang 'alas* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brought home* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *according to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasantly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chided* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mercilessly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behaved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accuse them falsely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go wrong* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows what's good for her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *persuade him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cowbird* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evidence from* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with her connivance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dolt* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *your doing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wherever* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *decent clothes* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are you doing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are you* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *why whisper* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bless me* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *give up your tricks* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *confidante* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *scold* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *like* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bad luck to you!* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *misfortune* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *poor* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *because of expense* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *descent* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *you say* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bad humor* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *utter dolt* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lecher* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *who* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *because* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *either* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gentility* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flirtatiousness* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by your account* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *defend* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *everywhere* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *desires* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *her* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *have commerce with* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *you say* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mate* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *own* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *willingly take* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *so you say* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *loser*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aims for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thunderbolt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lightning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *might* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *withered neck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leaking* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bless me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tethered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a scold*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *horses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tried out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *times*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bowls* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *household goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doddering scoundrel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nurse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chambermaid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *relatives*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you say* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lees, dregs (lies)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not want him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you hide*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *bad luck to you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strongbox*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *property* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you think to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady of the house*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even though*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *furious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *property*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *despite your watchfulness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would like to lock*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enjoyment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not believe any*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worries about*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *liberty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *astronomer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Sir Ptolemy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(an astronomical treatise)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *highest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *does not care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *controls the world*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if you have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *why need*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *notice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as much sex as you like*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *miser* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *refuse to allow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *less*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you need not complain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strengthen (your position)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dress* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *jewelry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in accord with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *interpretation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not at all*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *house (stay inside)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *but* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sleek*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *has dawned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go caterwauling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sir scoundrel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *run* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bodyguard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless I please*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deceive him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as I may prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fourth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shorten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you preach*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misfortunes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comparisons*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *apply* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *metaphors*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *compare* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barren* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burns* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even though* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guiltless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whinny* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrong* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have been ruined* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grinds* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complained* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *war stopped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were guilty in their lives* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mistresses* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accuse them* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sickness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *affection* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *had sex with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pretext* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delight* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boast* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at the end* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grumbling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially in bed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misfortune* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(financial) ransom* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *allow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(sexual) foolery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *profit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preserved meat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *table* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repaid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *has not been repaid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *like a raging lion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fall short of his object* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *my dear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *note* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kiss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well-balanced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Job's* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *endure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peace* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must yield* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long-suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grumble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fair thing (French)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taste* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reveler* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *lover*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *playfulness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *magpie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gulp*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deprived (of)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frightened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *erotic activity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as surely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desirous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intoxicated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I think back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gaiety*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *good*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poison*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deprived me of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vigor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *try*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *paid back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *acted so friendly with people*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pinched*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nobody*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grievously*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tormented*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *died*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies buried*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *elaborate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tomb*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *with great craft*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is a mere waste* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expensively*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bless him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coffin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worst rascal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a row*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *talk me round*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beaten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *back* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *standoffish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowd* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expensive goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bargain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *value*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodged at home*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *close friend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secrets*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as I may prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disclosed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confidences*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *utter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *friend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *April*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *opportunity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amorous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did I know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *good luck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *visits*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *miracle plays* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *weddings*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wore my bright scarlet gowns*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clothes mites*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do you know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intimacy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foresight*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *widow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boasting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worthless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rush*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *all is lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pretended*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mother* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on my back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *signifies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *mother's instruction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bier (dead)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wept continually* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *customary*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kerchief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided with a partner*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guarantee*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the next morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bier*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *possession*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *youthful appetites*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suited*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amorous one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well disposed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a child of Venus*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sexiness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *feistiness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dominant sign* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Taurus*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *horoscope*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fellow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Mars's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *private*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *salvation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in moderation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *notice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided he pleased* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *handsome* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *festivity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *property* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I repented* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bitterly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tolerate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I desired* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *struck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ripped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *page* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *became* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *defiant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true chatterbox* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stories* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *summer's* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knowledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same* [Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *allow* [Return to reference](#) °
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The Wife of Bath's Tale

In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,
Of which that Britouns^o speken great honor,
All was this land fulfild of fairye:²
The elf-queene with her jolly company
860 Daunced full ofte in many a greene mede^o—
This was the old opinion as I read;
I speak of many hundred years ago.
But now can no man see none elves mo,^o
For now the grete^o charity and prayeres
865 Of limitours,³ and othere holy freres,^o
That serchen^o every land and every stream,
As thick as motes^o in the sonne-beam,
Blessing halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,^o
Cities, burghes,^o castles, high toures,^o
870 Thropes, berners, shipnes,^o dayeries—
This maketh that there been no fairies
For thereas wont to walken was an elf⁴
There walketh now the limitour himself,
In undermeles^o and in morweninges,^o
875 And saith his Matins and his holy thinges^o
As he gooth in his limitacioun.^o
Women may go safely up and down:
In every bush or under every tree
There is none other incubus⁵ but he,
880 And he ne will doon them but^o dishonour.
And so befell it that this King Arthour
Had in his house a lusty bachelor,^o
That on a day cam riding from river,^o
And happed^o that, alone as he was born,
885 He saw a maide walking him biforn;^o
Of which maid anon, maugree her head,^o
By very^o force he reft her maidenhead;^o

For which oppression^o was such clamour,
And such pursuit^o unto the King Arthour,
890 That damned was this knight for to be dead
By course of law, and should have lost his head—
Paraventure^o such was the statute tho^o—
But that^o the queen⁶ and other ladies mo^o
So longe prayeden^o the king of^o grace,
895 Till he his life him granted in the place,
And yaf^o him to the queen, all at her will,
To choose whether she would him save or spille.^o
The queen thanketh the king with all her might,
And after this thus spake she to the knight,
900 When that she saw her time^o upon a day:^o
"Thou standest yet," quod she, "in such array^o
That of thy life yet hastou no surety.^o
I grante thee life if thou canst tellen me
What thing it is that women most desiren:
905 Beware and keep thy nekke boon^o from iron.^o
And if thou canst not tellen me anon,^o
Yet will I give thee leave for to gon^o
A twelvemonth and a day to seche^o and lere^o
An answer suffisant^o in this matere;
910 And surety^o will I have er^o that thou pace,^o
Thy body for to yelden^o in this place."
Woe was this knight, and sorrowfully he siketh.^o
But what, he may not doon^o all as him liketh,
And atte last he chees^o him for to wende,
915 And come again, right at the yeres ende,
With such answer as God would him purvey,^o
And taketh his leave and wendeth forth his way.
He seeketh every house and every place
Whereas he hopeth for to finde grace^o
920 To lerne what thing women love most.
But he ne could arriven in no cost^o
Whereas he mighte find in this matere

Two creatures according in-fere.°

925 Some saiden women loven best riches;
Some said honor, some saide jollinesse;°
Some rich array,° some saiden lust abed,°
And ofte time to be widow and wedde.
Some saide that our hertes been most eased
930 When that we been yflattered and ypleased—
He gooth full nigh the soothe,° I will not lie:
A man shall win us best with flattery,
And with attendance° and with bisynesse°
Been we ylimed,° bothe more and lesse.

935 And some sayen that we loven best
For to be free, and do right as us lest,°
And that no man reprove us of our vice,
But say that we be wise and nothing nice.°
For trewely,° there is none of us all,
If any wight° will clawe° us on the gall,°
940 That we nil° kikke for° he saith us sooth:°
Assay° and he shall find it that so dooth.°
For be we never so vicious within,
We will be holden° wise and clean of sin.

945 And some sayn that great delight han° we
For to be holden stable and eek° secree,°
And in oo° purpose steadefastly to dwell,
And not bewraye° thing that men us tell—
But that tale is not worth a rake-stele.°
Pardee,° we women conne° nothing hele:°
950 Witness on Mida.° Will ye hear the tale?

Ovide,⁷ amonges othere thinges smale,°
Said Mida had under his longe heres,°
Growing upon his head, two asses eres,°
The whiche vice° he hid as he best might
955 Full subtilly° from every mannes sight,
That save° his wife there wiste° of it namo.°
He loved her most and trusted her also.

He prayed her that to no creature
 She sholde tellen of his disfigure.°
 960 She swore him nay, for all this world to win,
 She nolde° do that villainy or sin
 To make her husband han° so foul a name:°
 She nolde not tell it for her owene shame.
 But nonetheless, her thoughte° that she died°
 965 That she so longe should a conseil° hide;
 Her thought it swal° so sore about her heart
 That needely° some word her must asterte,°
 And sith° she dorste° tell it to no man,
 Down to a mareis faste by° she ran—
 970 Till she came there her herte was afire—
 And as a bitore bombleth in the mire,⁸
 She laid her mouth unto the water down:
 "Bewray° me not, thou water, with thy soun,"°
 Quod she. "To thee I tell it and namo:°
 975 Myn husband hath longe asses eres° two.
 Now is myn heart all whole,° now is it oute.
 I might no longer keep it, out of doute."
 Here may ye see, though we a time abide,°
 Yet out it moot:° we can no conseil° hide.
 980 The remnant of the tale if ye will heare,
 Redeth Ovide, and there ye may it leere.°⁹
 This knight of which my tale is specially,
 When that he saw he might not come thereby°—
 This is to say what women loven most—
 985 Within his breast full sorweful was his ghost,°
 But home he gooth, he mighte not sojourn:°
 The day was come that homeward must he turn.
 And in his way it happed° him to ride
 In all this care° under° a forest side,°
 990 Whereas° he saw upon a dance go
 Of ladies four and twenty, and yet mo;°
 Toward the whiche dance he drew ful yerne,°

In hope that some wisdom should he lerne.
 But certainly, er^o he came fully there,
 995 Vanished was this dance, he niste^o where.
 No creature saw he that bore life,
 Save on the green he saw sitting a wife^o—
 A fouler wight^o there may no man devise.^o
 Again^o the knight this olde wife gan rise,
 1000 And saide, "Sir knight, here forth ne lith^o no way.^o
 Tell me what ye seeken, by youre fay.^o
 Paraventure^o it may the better be:
 These olde folk conn muchel thing,"^o quod she.
 "My leve^o mother," quod this knight, "certain,
 1005 I nam but^o dead but if^o that I can sayn
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 Could ye me wisse,^o I would well quite your
 hire."^o
 "Plight^o me thy truth^o here in myn hand," quod
 she,
 "The nexte thing that I require thee,^o
 1010 Thou shalt it do, if it lie in thy might,
 And I will tell it you er^o it be night."
 "Have here my trouthe," quod the knight. "I
 graunte."
 "Then," quod she, "I dare me well avaunte^o
 Thy life is safe, for I will stand thereby.
 1015 Upon my life the queen will say as I.
 Let see which is the proudest of them alle
 That wereth on a coverchief^o or a calle^o
 That dare say nay of that I shall thee teach.
 Let us go forth withouten longer speech."
 1020 Tho^o rouned^o she a pistel^o in his ear,
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
 When they be comen to the court, this knight
 Said he had holde^o his day as he had hight,^o
 And ready was his answer, as he said.
 1025 Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,

And many a widow—for^o that they been^o wise—
The queen herself sitting as justice,
Assembled been this answer for to hear,
And afterward this knight was bode^o appear.
1030 To every wight^o commanded was silence,
And that the knight should telle in audience^o
What thing that worldly women loven best.
This knight ne stood not still^o as dooth a beast,
But to his question anon^o answered
1035 With manly voice that all the court it heard.
 “My liege^o lady, generally,”^o quod he,
 “Women desire to have sovereignty
As well over their husband as their love,
And for to been in maistrie him above.^o
1040 This is your most^o desire though ye me kill.
Dooth as you list:^o I am here at your will.”
 In all the court ne was there wife ne maid
Ne widow that contraried^o that he said,
But saiden he was worthy han^o his life.
1045 And with that word up sterte^o that olde wife,
Which that the knight saw sitting on the green;
“Mercy,” quod she, “my sovereign lady queen,
Er^o that your court departe, do me right.
I taughte this answer unto the knight,
1050 For which he plighte^o me his trouthe there
The firste thing I wolde him requere^o
He would it do, if it lay in his might.
Before the court then pray I thee, sir knight,”
Quod she, “that thou me take unto thy wife,
1055 For well thou woost^o that I have kept^o thy life.
If I say false, say nay, upon thy fay.”^o
 This knight answerd, “Allas and wailaway,
I woot^o right well that such was my behest.^o
For Goddes love, as chees^o a new request:
1060 Take all my good^o and let my body go.”
 “Nay then,” quod she, “I shrewe^o us bothe two.

For though that I be foul and old and poor,
 I nold^o for all the metal ne for ore
 That under earth is grave or lith above,¹
 1065 But if thy wife I were^o and eek^o thy love."
 "My love," quod he. "Nay, my damnation!
 Allas, that any of my nation^o
 Should ever so foul disparaged^o be."
 But all for naught, th'ende is this, that he
 1070 Constrained was: he needes must her wed,
 And taketh his olde wife and gooth to bed.
 Now wolden some men say, paraventure,^o
 That for my negligence I do no cure^o
 To tellen you the joy and all th'array^o
 1075 That at the feast was that ilke^o day.
 To which thing shortly answer I shall:
 I say there nas^o no joy ne feast at all;
 There nas but heaviness and mucche sorwe.
 For prively^o he wedded hire on morwe,^o
 1080 And all day after hid him as an owl,
 So woe was him, his wife looked so foul.
 Great was the woe the knight had in his thought:
 When he was with his wife abedde brought,
 He walweth^o and he turneth to and fro.
 1085 His olde wife lay smiling evermo,
 And said, "O dear husband, *benedicite*, ^o
 Fareth^o every knight thus with his wife as ye?^o
 Is this the law of King Arthures hous?
 Is every knight of his thus daungerous?^o
 1090 I am your owene love and your wife;
 I am she which that saved hath your life,
 And certes^o yet ne did I you never unright.^o
 Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?
 Ye faren like a man had lost his wit.
 1095 What is my guilt? For Goddes love, tell it,
 And it shall been amended^o if I may."

"Amended!" quod this knight. "Allas, nay, nay,
 It will not been amended nevermo.
 Thou art so loathly^o and so old also,
 1100 And thereto comen of so low a kinde,^o
 That little wonder is though I walwe^o and winde.^o
 So wolde God,^o myn herte wolde breste!"^o
 "Is this," quod she, "the cause of your unreste?"
 "Ye, certainly," quod he. "No wonder is."
 1105 "Now sire," quod she, "I could amende all this,
 If that me liste,^o er^o it were dayes three,
 So^o well ye mighte bere you^o unto me.
 "But for ye speken of such gentillesse^o
 As is descended out of old richesse^o—
 1110 That therefore sholden ye^o be gentlemen—
 Such arrogance nis^o not worth an hen.²
 Look who that is most virtuous alway,
 Privy and apert,³ and most entendeth ay^o
 To do the gentle^o deedes that he can,
 1115 Take him for the greatest gentleman.
 Christ will^o we claim of him our gentillesse,
 Not of our elders for their old richesse.^o
 For though they give us all their heritage,
 For which we claim to been of high parage,^o
 1120 Yet may they not bequeath for nothing
 To noon of us their virtuous living,
 That made them gentlemen ycalled be,
 And bade us folwen them in such degree.^o
 "Well can the wise poet of Florence,
 1125 That highte Dant,⁴ speken in this sentence;^o
 Lo, in such manner rhyme is Dantes tale:
 'Full seld^o up riseth by his braunches⁵ small
 Prowess^o of man, for God of his prowess
 Will that of him^o we claim our gentillesse.'
 1130 For of our elders may we nothing claim
 But temporal thing^o that man may hurt and maim.

Eek^o every wight^o woot^o this as well as I,
If gentillesse were planted naturally
Unto a certain lineage down the line,
1135 Privy and apert⁶ then would they never fine^o
To doon^o of gentillesse the fair office^o—
They mighte do no villainy or vice.

“Take fire and bear it in the darkeste hous
Betwix this and the Mount of Caucasus,
1140 And let men shut the doors and go thenne,^o
Yet will the fire as faire lie^o and brenne^o
As twenty thousand men might it behold:
His office^o naturel ay^o will it hold,^o
Up^o peril of my life, till that it die.
1145 Here may ye see well how that genterye^o
Is not annexed^o to possession,^o
Sith^o folk ne doon their operacion^o
Alway, as doth the fire, lo, in his kind.^o
For God it wot,^o men may well often find
1150 A lordes son do shame and villainy;
And he that will han pris of^o his gentrye,^o
For^o he was born of a gentil^o hous,
And had his elders noble and virtuous,
And nil^o himselven^o do no gentle deedes,
1155 Ne folwen his gentle ancestor that dead is,
He nis^o not gentle,^o be he duke or earl—
For villainy’s sinful deedes make a churl.
Thy gentillesse nis but renomee^o
Of thine auncestres for their high bountee,^o
1160 Which is a straunge^o thing for thy persone.
For gentillesse cometh from God alone.
Then comth our verray^o gentillesse of^o grace:
It was nothing bequethe us with our place.⁷
Thinketh how noble, as saith Valerius,⁸
1165 Was thilke Tullius Hostilius⁹
That out of povertē^o rose to high noblesse.

Redeth Senek, and redeth eek^o Boece:¹
 There shall ye seen express^o that no drede^o is
 That he is gentle^o that dooth gentle deedes.
 1170 And therefore, leve^o husband, I thus conclude:
 All^o were it that mine ancestors weren rude,^o
 Yet may the high God—and so hope I—
 Grant me grace to liven virtuously.
 Then am I gentle when that I begin
 1175 To liven virtuously and waive^o sin.
 “And thereas^o ye of poverté me repreve,^o ²
 The high God, on whom that we believe,
 In willful^o poverté chees^o to live his life;
 And certes^o every man, maiden, or wife
 1180 May understand that Jesus, hevene king,
 Ne would not choose a vicious living.^o
 Glad poverté is an honest^o thing, certain;
 This will Senek and othere clerkes sayn.
 Whoso that halt him paid of³ his poverté,
 1185 I hold him rich all^o had he not a shirte.
 He that coveiteth^o is a povre wight,^o
 For he would han^o that is not in his might;^o
 But he that not hath, ne coveiteth^o have,
 Is rich, although we hold him but a knave.^o
 1190 Verray^o povert it singeth proprely.^o
 Juvenal⁴ saith of poverté,^o ‘Merrily
 The poore man, when he gooth by the way,
 Beforn the thieves he may sing and play.’
 Povert is hateful good, and as I guess,
 1195 A full great bringer out of bisyness;^o
 A great amender^o eek^o of sapience^o
 To him that taketh it in pacience;
 Povert is thing, although it seem elenge,^o
 Possessioun that no wight^o will challenge;^o
 1200 Povert ful often, when a man is low,
 Maketh^o his God and eek^o himself to know;

Povert a spectacle^o is, as thinketh me,^o
 Through which he may his verray^o frendes see.
 And therefore, sir, sin^o that I not you greve,^o
 1205 Of my povert no more ye me repreve.^o
 "Now sir, of elde^o ye repreve me:
 And certes^o sir, though noon authority
 Were in no book, ye gentils^o of honour
 Sayn that men should an old wight^o doon favour
 1210 And clepe^o him fader, for^o your gentillesse—
 And authors^o shall I finden, as I guess.
 "Now there ye say that I am foul and old:
 Then dread you not to been a cokewold,^o
 1215 For filth and eld, also mote I thee,^o
 Been great wardeins^o upon chastity.
 But nonetheless, sin^o I know your delight,
 I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.
 "Choose now," quod she, "one of these thinges
 tweye:^o
 1220 To han^o me foul and old till that I deye
 And be to you a trewe humble wife,
 And never you displease in all my life;
 Or elles^o ye will han me young and fair,
 And take your aventure^o of the repair^o
 That shall be to your house because of me—
 1225 Or in some other place, well may be.
 Now choose youreselven whether that you liketh."^o
 This knight aviseth him^o and sore siketh;^o
 But atte last he said in this manere:
 "My lady and my love, and wife so dere,
 1230 I put me in your wise governaunce:
 Cheseth^o youreself which may be most plesaunce^o
 And most honour to you and me also.
 I do no fors the whether^o of the two,
 For as you liketh^o it suffiseth^o me."
 1235 "Then have I got of you maistry,"^o quod she,
 "Sin^o I may choose and govern as me lest?"^o

“Ye, certes,^o wife,” quod he. “I hold it best.”
 “Kiss me,” quod she. “We be no longer wrothe.^o
 For by my trouthe,^o I will be to you bothe—
 1240 This is to sayn, ye, bothe fair and good.
 I pray to God that I mote sterven wood,^o
 But^o I to you be all so good and trewe
 As ever was wife sin that the world was newe.
 And but^o I be tomorn^o as fair to seene
 1245 As any lady, emperice,^o or queene,
 That is betwix the east and eek the west,
 Do with my life and death right as you lest:
 Caste^o up the curtain, look how that it is.”
 And when the knight saw verily all this,
 1250 That she so fair was and so young thereto,
 For joy he hente^o her in his armes two;
 His herte bathed in a bath of bliss;
 A thousand time arewe^o he gan her kiss,
 And she obeyed him in everything
 1255 That might do him plesance or liking.
 And thus they live unto their lives end
 In parfit^o joy. And Jesu Christ us send
 Husbandes meeke, young, and fresh abed^o—
 And grace t’overbide^o them that we wed.
 1260 And eek^o I pray Jesu shorte^o their lives
 That not will be governed by their wives;
 And olde and angry niggards^o of dispence^o—
 God send them soon a verray pestilence!^o

Endnotes

- Note 2: Filled full of fairy creatures.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Friars licensed to beg in a certain territory, their “limitacioun” (line 877).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Where an elf used to walk.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: A spirit that lies with mortal women.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Late medieval English queens performed a public ritual role as intercessors with their husbands: the most famous example is Queen Philippa's interceding with Edward III on behalf of the burghers of Calais in 1347 and saving their lives. Chaucer exploits this public role in *The Knight's Tale*, in *The Tale of Melibee*, and in the *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women* (in the last case, on Chaucer's own behalf).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (before 8 C.E.), 11.174–93; there, the secret is disclosed not by Midas's wife but by a male servant who had cut his hair.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: As a bittern (marsh bird) booms in the marshland.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The reeds disclosed the secret by whispering in Latin *aurēs aselli*, "ass's ears."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Is buried or lies above (on the surface).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Gentillesse*, nobility based on character, not class, is a key theme in Chaucer's work—as in *The Franklin's Tale* and his short poem *Gentillesse*. It is an important value for one who, like Chaucer (and Dante before him; see note to line 1126), would rise through merit rather than birth.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In private and in public.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Dante (1265–1321), Italian poet; see his *Il Convivio* (ca. 1304–07, *The Banquet*), canzone prefixed to the fourth treatise. See also the *Romance of the Rose* (18577–866).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Its own branches (that is, efforts).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In private and in public.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In no way bequeathed to us with our social rank.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Valerius Maximus; see note to line 462, above.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Tullus Hostilius, traditionally the third king of Rome (r. 673–642 B.C.E.).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Boethius (d. 524), Roman statesman and philosopher (see his *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3.pr.6); Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.), Roman philosopher, statesman, and tragedian (see *Moral Epistles* 44).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The references in lines 1177–1200 were probably all drawn from the *Communiologium* (ca. 1280) of John of Wales, a preacher's encyclopedia of sources.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Considers himself satisfied with.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Roman poet (ca. 55–ca. 130 C.E.); see *Satire* 10.22.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *Bretons*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meadow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *more*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *great*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *friars*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *scour*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dust specks*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bedrooms*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *townships* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *towers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *villages, barns, cowsheds*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *afternoons* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mornings*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *liturgical offices*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *on his round*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *anything but*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *vigorous young knight*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hawking*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it so chanced*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *before*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *without her consent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *actual* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took her virginity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crime*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *petitioning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perchance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *asked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *put to death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one day*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *assurance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neck bone* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(of an ax)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seek* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *find out*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *satisfactory*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a pledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pass*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deliver yourself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provide*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *good fortune*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *region*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreeing together*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *merrymaking*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *finery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure in bed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goes very near the truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attention* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *solicitude* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trapped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rub* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sore spot* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kick because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *try* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *does* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *considered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reveal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rake handle* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *can* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *conceal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Midas* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trivial* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hair* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ears* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flaw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *craftily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no one else* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *deformity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reputation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it seemed to her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *swelled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *necessarily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearby marsh* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *betray* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no one else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ears* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it must come out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spirit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chanced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beside* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woman* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *creature* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *imagine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to meet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *road*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perhaps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know many things*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *am as good as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guide*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repay your trouble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *require of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *boast*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head cloth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hairnet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whispered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *message*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kept* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bidden to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *open hearing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not stay silent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honored* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *universally*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dominion over him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greatest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases you*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *contradicted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *require of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saved*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *choose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *possessions*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not wish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *other than to be your wife* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kindred*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fouly disgraced*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perhaps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take no trouble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *display*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreetly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her in the morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tosses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bless me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *standoffish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *put right*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ugly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *class*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *toss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *twist* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *please God* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *break* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if I wanted to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nobility* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wealth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *should you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strives always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wishes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wealth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lineage* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *status* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maxim* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seldom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellence* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from him (God)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *something worldly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *and* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carry out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble practice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from there* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blaze* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *its function* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maintain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *upon* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *gentility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *connected* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *property*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perform their functions*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *its nature*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have credit for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gentility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *genteel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is nothing but renown*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *their great magnanimity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alien*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poverty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *explicitly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lowborn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shun*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whereas* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reproach*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *voluntary* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lifestyle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honorable*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *covets* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poor creature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *power* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desires (to have)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commoner* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *of its own accord* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poverty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *release from anxiety* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improver* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wisdom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wretched* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dispute* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *causes him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyeglass* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it seem to me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harm* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reproach* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *old age* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for certain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gentlefolk* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *textual authority* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cuckold* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as I may prosper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guardians* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thronging (of men)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whichever pleases you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thinks hard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Choose* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not mind whichever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *satisfies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mastery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for certain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at odds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tomorrow morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *empress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lift*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in a row*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perfect*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in bed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outlive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shorten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begrudgers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expense*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *real plague*[Return to reference](#) °

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale

Like *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, *The Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale* develop in profound and surprising ways the portrait sketched in *The General Prologue*. In his *Prologue* the Pardoner boasts to his fellow pilgrims about his own depravity and the ingenuity with which he abuses his office and extracts money from poor and ignorant people.

The medieval pardoner's job was to collect money for charitable enterprises, such as hospitals, supported by the Church. In return for donations, he was licensed by the pope to award some remission of punishment for sins that the donor had repented and confessed. By canon law pardoners were permitted to work only in a prescribed area; within that area they might visit churches during Sunday service, briefly explain their mission, receive contributions, and in the pope's name issue indulgences, which were considered to be not a sale but a gift from the infinite treasury of Christ's mercy made in return for a gift of money. In practice, pardoners ignored the restrictions on their office, made their way into churches at will, preached emotional sermons, and claimed extraordinary power for their pardons.

The Pardoner's Tale is a bombastic sermon against gluttony, gambling, and swearing, which he preaches to the pilgrims to show off his professional skills. The sermon is framed by a narrative that is supposed to function as an *exemplum* (that is, an illustration) of the scriptural text, the one on which the Pardoner, as he tells the pilgrims, always preaches: "Radix malorum est cupiditas" (Avarice is the root of evil).

The Introduction

Oure Hoste gan to swear as he were wood^o
"Harrow,"^o quod he, "by nailes and by blood,
This was a false churl and a false justice.¹
As shameful death as herte may devise
Come to these judges and their advocats.²
5 Algate^o this sely^o maid is slain, alas!
Allas, too deare bought she beauty!
Wherefore I say alday^o that men may see
The giftes of Fortune and of Nature
Been cause of death to many a creature.³
10 As bothe giftes that I speak of now,
Men han^o full ofte more for harm than prow.^o
"But truwely, myn owene maister dear,
This is a piteous^o tale for to hear.
But nonetheless, passe over, is no fors:^o
15 I pray to God to save thy gentle cors,^o
And eek^o thine urinals and thy jurdones,⁴
Thyn ipocras^o and eek thy galiones,^o
And every boiste^o full of thy letuarye^o—
God bless them, and our lady Saint Marye.
20 So mote I theen,^o thou art a proper man,
And like a prelate, by Saint Ronian!⁵
Said I not well? I can not speak in terme.^o
But well I woot,^o thou doost^o myn heart to erme^o
That I almost have caught a cardinacle.⁶
25 By corpus bones,⁷ but if^o I have triacle,^o
Or else a draught^o of moist^o and corny^o ale,
Or but I here^o anon^o a merry tale,
Myn heart is lost for pity of this maid.
"Thou bel ami,^o thou Pardoner," he said,
30 "Tell us some mirth or japes^o right anon."
"It shall be doon," quod he, "by Saint Ronion.

But first," quod he, "here at this ale-stake^o
 I will both drink and eaten of a cake."
 And right anon these gentles^o gan to crie,
 35 "Nay, let him tell us of no ribaudye.^o
 Tell us some moral thing that we may lere,^o
 Some wit,^o and thanne will we gladly heare."
 "I grant, ywis,"^o quod he, "but I moot^o think
 40 Upon some honest^o thing while that I drink."

Endnotes

- Note 1: The Host is responding to the Physician's tale, the story of a beautiful and virtuous Roman maiden who is entrapped by a corrupt judge and then killed by her father to preserve her honor. The Host reacts with grief and consternation.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Given the scansion and the rhyme with "allas" (line 6), *advocats* is an example of a word in Chaucer's poetry that requires a pronunciation as in modern French.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Some modern editions here print two lines, that may be an early canceled draft but are more probably scribal embellishments: "Hire beautee was hire deth, I dar wel sayn, / Allas, so pitously as she was slayn." We reject the lines because they repeat the substance of lines 6–7 and interrupt the passage on the gifts of Nature and Fortune.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Jordans: vessels or flasks (for examining urine), as are urinals.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: St. Ronan (the name of several Irish saints) or St. Ninian (d. ca. 432), who evangelized the Picts in Scotland, with a possible play on "runnion" (penis). The Pardoner picks up the Host's usage (line 32).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Apparently a cardiac condition, confused in the Host's mind with a cardinal.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: A blending of two oaths, “God’s bones” and *corpus Dei* (body of God; Latin).[Return to reference 7](#)

Notes

- °: *insane*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *help*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *nevertheless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *innocent*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *always*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *have* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *profit*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pitiful*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it doesn’t matter*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *body*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cordials* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *medicine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *box* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *medicine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *technical language, jargon*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *make* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *grieve*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *medicinal drink*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gulp* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fresh* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *malty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hear* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *at once*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dear friend*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *jokes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *inn sign*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *gentlefolk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *obscenity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wisdom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decent*[Return to reference](#) °

The Prologue⁸

Lordings^o—quod he—in churches when I preach,
I paine me to han^o an hautein^o speech,
And ring it out as round as gooth a bell,
For I can al by rote^o that I tell.
My theme is alway one, and ever was:
45 *Radix malorum est cupiditas.*⁹
First I pronounce whennes^o that I come,
And then my bulles¹ show I all and some:^o
Oure liege lordes^o seal on my patente,^o
That show I first, my body to warente,^o
50 That no man be so bold, ne priest ne clerk,
Me to disturb of Christes holy work.
And after that then tell I forth my tales^o—
Bulls of popes and of cardinals,
Of patriarks and bisshopes I shewe,
55 And in Latin I speak a wordes fewe
To saffron with^o my predicacioun,^o
And for to stir them to devocioun.
Then show I forth my longe crystal stones,^o
Ycrammed full of cloutes^o and of bones—
60 Relics been they, as wenen^o they each one.
Then have I in latoun^o a shoulder-bone
Which that was of an holy Jewes sheep.²
“Goode men,” I say, “take of my wordes keep:^o
If that this bone be wasshe in any well,
65 If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swell,^o
That any worm hath eat or worm ystonge,^o
Take water of that well and wash his tongue,
And it is whole^o anon. And furthermore,
Of pockes^o and of scab and every sore
70 Shall every sheep be whole that of this well
Drinketh a draught. Take keep eek that I tell:^o

If that the good man that the beestes oweth^o
Will every week, er^o that the cock him croweth,
Fasting drinken of this well a draughte—
75 As thilke^o holy Jew our eldres taughte—
His beestes and his stoor^o shall multiply.
 "And sir, also it heleth jealousy:
For though a man be fall in jealous rage,
Let maken^o with this water his potage,^o
80 And never shall he more his wife mistriste,^o
Though he the sooth of her defaute^o wiste,^o
Al had she^o taken priestes two or three.
 "Here is a mitten eek that ye may see:
He that his hand will put in this mitein
85 He shall have multiplying of his grain,
When he hath sowen, be it wheat or oates—
So that^o he offer pence or elles grotes.³
 "Good men and women, one thing warn I you:
If any wight^o be in this chirche now
90 That hath doon sinne horrible, that he
Dare not for shame of it yshriven be,^o
Or any woman, be she young or old,
That hath ymaked her husband cokewold,^o
Such folk shall have no power ne no grace
95 To offren^o to my relics in this place;
And whoso findeth him out of^o such blame,
He will come up and offre in Goddes name,
And I assoile^o him by the authority
Which that by bull^o ygraunted was to me."
100 By this gaude^o have I wonne, year by year,
An hundred mark⁴ sith^o I was pardoner.
I stonde like a clerk⁵ in my pulpet,
And when the lewed^o people is down yset,^o
I preche so as ye han^o heard before,
105 And tell an hundred false japes^o more.
Then paine I me^o to strecche forth the nekke,

And east and west upon the people I beke^o
As doth a dove, sitting on a berne;^o
Mine handes and my tongue goon so yerne^o
110 That it is joy to see my busynesse.
Of avarice and of such cursednesse^o
Is all my preaching, for to make them free^o
To given their pence, and namely^o unto me,
For myn intent is not but^o for to winne,^o
115 And nothing for correccioun of sinne:
I rekke^o never when that they been buried
Though that their soules goon a-blackberried.^o
For certes,^o many a predicacioun^o
Comth ofte time of evil intencioun:
120 Som for plesance of^o folk and flattery,
To been avaunced^o by hypocrisy,
And some for vaine glory,^o and some for hate;
For when I dare none otherwayes debate,^o
Then will I stinge him with my tongue smerte^o
125 In preaching, so that he shall not asterte^o
To been defamed^o falsly, if that he
Hath trespassed to^o my brethren or to me.
For though I telle noght his propre name,
Men shall well knowe that it is the same
130 By signes and by othere circumstances.
Thus quite^o I folk that doon us displesances;^o
Thus spit I out my venom under hewe^o
Of holiness, to seem holy and true.
But shortly myn intende I will devise:^o
135 I preach of nothing but for coveitise;^o
Therefore my theme is yet and ever was
Radix malorum est cupiditas.
Thus can I preach again^o that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
140 But though myself be guilty in that sinne,
Yet can I maken other folk to twinne^o
From avarice, and sore^o to repente—

But that is not my principal intente:
 I preche nothing but for coveitise.
 145 Of this matter it ought enough suffise.
 Then tell I them examples^o many oon
 Of olde stories longe time agoon,
 For lewed^o people loven tales olde—
 Such thinges can they well reporte^o and holde.^o
 150 What, trowe ye^o that whiles I may preach,
 And winne gold and silver for^o I teach,
 That I will live in poverty willfully?^o
 Nay, nay, I thoghte^o it never, trewely,
 For I will preach and beg in sondry^o landes;
 155 I will not do no labour with mine handes,
 Ne make baskettes and live thereby,
 Because I will not beggen idelly.^o
 I will none of the Apostles countrefete:^o
 I will have money, wolle,^o cheese, and whete,
 160 Al were it^o given of the poorest page,
 Or of the poorest widow in a village—
 Al^o should her children sterve for^o famine.
 Nay, I will drinke licour of the vine
 And have a jolly wench in every town.
 165 But herkneth, lordings, in conclusioun,
 Your liking^o is that I shall tell a tale:
 Now have I drunk a draught of corny ale,
 By God, I hope I shall you tell a thing
 That shall by reason^o been at^o your liking;
 170 For though myself be a full vicious man,
 A moral tale yet I you telle can,
 Which I am wont^o to preche for to winne.^o
 Now hold your peace, my tale I will beginne.

Endnotes

- Note 8: The model for the Pardoner's *Prologue*, like that of the Wife of Bath, is a confessional figure in the *Romance of the Rose*—in this case, Faux-Semblant, or False Seeming (*Romance*, lines 10973–11950); but most of the detail is Chaucer's own, and much is derived from satire against the clergy and, especially, friars (False Seeming is dressed like a friar, not a pardoner). For pardoners, see the headnote to the tale as well as *General Prologue*, lines 669–714 (and notes).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The root of evils is avarice (Latin; 1 Timothy 6:10).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Papal or episcopal mandates (bulls), in this case specifying remission from divine punishment in exchange for donations or other penitential actions.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The reference here to a holy Jew, as in line 76, is deliberately unspecific and part of the pattern of fraud and mystification.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Pennies or else groats (coins worth 4 pence).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Marks are not coins but pecuniary units for accounting: 100 marks in England would have had a value of £66 13s 4d, about four times Chaucer's annual income as controller of wool customs.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Pardoner may not be a "clerk" at all (with a university degree and in holy orders), in which case he should not, strictly speaking, be (in a pulpit) preaching.[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *gentlemen*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *have* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *loud*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know all by heart*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *whence*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *one and all*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bishop's* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *license*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *safeguard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I keep talking*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *add spice to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preaching*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jars*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rags*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suppose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brass*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *notice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(with illness)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *snake stung*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pox*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also mark my words*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *owns*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stock*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have made* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soup*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mistrust*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *infidelity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if she had*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *make confession*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cuckold*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *offer (money)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *himself exempt from*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *absolve*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *papal or episcopal mandate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trick*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ignorant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sitting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tricks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I take pains*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nod*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *only* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gain (wealth)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *get lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sermon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in order to please*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promoted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pride*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take issue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharply*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slandered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *offended against*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay back* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injuries*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *color*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *describe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *break away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bitterly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moral anecdotes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uneducated*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *repeat* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *remember* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *do you believe* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *because* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by choice* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *intended* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *various* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unprofitably* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *imitate* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wool* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *even though it were* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *even if* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *die of* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasure* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for good reason* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *be to* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gain* [Return to reference °](#)

The Pardoner's Tale

175 In Flanders whilom^o was a company
Of yonge folk that haunteden^o folly—
As riot,⁶ hazard,^o stewes,^o and tavernes,
Where as^o with harpes, lutes, and giternes^o
They dance and playen at dice both day and night,
And eat also and drink over their might,^o
180 Through which they doon^o the devil sacrifice
Within that devil's temple⁷ in cursed wise
By superfluity abominable.
Their oathes been so great and so damnable
That it is grisly^o for to hear them swear:
185 Our blessed Lordes body they totere^{o8}—
Them thoughte Jewes rent^o him not enough.⁹
And each of them at otheres sinne lough.^o
And right anon then comen tombesteres,^o
Fetis^o and small, and yonge frutesteres,^o
190 Singers with harpes, bawdes,^o wafereres^o—
Which been the verray devil's officers,
To kindle and blowe the fire of lechery
That is annexed^o unto gluttony.
The Holy Writ take I to my witnessed¹
195 That luxury^o is in wine and drunkenesse.
Lo, how that drunken Lot unkindely^o
Lay by^o his daughters two unwittingly:^o
So drunk he was, he niste^o what he wroghte.^{o 2}
Herodes, whoso well the stories soughte,³
200 When he of wine was replete^o at his feast,
Right at his owne table he yaf^o his heeste^o
To sleen^o the Baptist John, full guileless.⁴
Senek⁵ saith a good word douteless:
He saith he can no difference find
205

Bitwixe^o a man that is out of his mind
And a man which that is drunkelewe,^o
But that woodnesse,^o yfallen in a shrewe,⁶
Persevereth^o longer than doth drunkenesse.
O glotonye, full of cursednesse!^o
210 O cause first of our confusioun!^o
O original^o of our dampnacioun,^o
Till Christ had bought^o us with his blood again!
Lo, how dear,^o shortly for to sayn,
Abought^o was thilke^o cursed villainy;
215 Corrupt was all this world for gluttony:
Adam our father and his wife also
From Paradis to labour and to woe
Were driven for that vice, it is no drede.^o
For while that Adam fasted, as I rede,
220 He was in Paradis; and when that he
Ate of the fruit defended^o on a tree,
Anon^o he was out cast to woe and pain.
O gluttony, on thee well ought us plain!^o
O, wiste a man^o how many maladies
225 Folwen of excesse and of gluttonies,
He wolde been^o the more mesurable^o
Of his diete, sitting at his table.
Allas, the shorte throat, the tender mouth,
Maketh^o that east and west and north and south,
230 In earth, in air, in water, men to swinke,^o
To get a glutton dainty mete^o and drinke.
Of this matter, O Paul,^o well canstou trete:
"Mete unto wombe,^o and wombe eek^o unto mete
Shall God destroyen both," as Paulus^o saith.⁷
235 Allas, a foul thing is it, by my faith,
To say this word, and fouler is the dede,
When man so drinketh of the white and rede^o
That of his throat he maketh his privy^o
240 Through thilke^o cursed superfluity.

The Apostle^o weeping saith full piteously,
 "There walken many of which you told have I—
 I say it now weeping with piteous voice—
 That they been enemies of Christes crois,^o
 Of which the^o end is death—womb is their god!"⁸
 245 O womb, O belly, O stinking cod,^o
 Fulfilled of dung and of corrupcioun!
 At either end of thee foul is the soun.^o
 How great labour and cost is thee to finde!^o
 These cookes, how they stamp^o and strain and
 250 grinde,
 And turnen substance into accident⁹
 To fulfill all thy likerous talent!^o
 Out of the harde bones knocke they
 The mary,^o for they caste not away
 That may go through the gullet softe and soote.^o
 255 Of spicery^o of leef and bark and roote
 Shall been his sauce ymaked by delight,
 To make him yet a newer appetit.
 But certes, he that haunteth^o such delices^o
 Is dead while that he liveth in tho^o vices.¹
 260 A lecherous thing is wine, and drunkenesse
 Is full of striving^o and of wrecchednesse.²
 O drunke man, disfigured is thy face!
 Sour is thy breath, foul artou^o to embrace!
 And through thy drunke nose seemeth the soun^o
 265 As though thou saidest ay^o "Sampsoun,
 Sampsoun"—
 And yet, God woot,^o Sampson drank never wine.³
 Thou fallest as it were a stiked swine;^o
 Thy tongue is lost, and all thyn honest cure,^o
 For drunkenesse is verray sepulture^o
 270 Of mannes wit^o and his discrecioun.
 In whom that drink hath dominacioun
 He can no conseil^o keep, it is no drede.^o

Now keep you from the white and from the rede^o—
 And namely^o from the white wine of Lepe,⁴
 275 That is to sell^o in Fisshstreete or in Chepe.⁵
 The wine of Spaine creepeth subtilly^{o6}
 In othere wines growing faste^o by,
 Of which there riseth such fumosity^o
 That when a man hath drunken draughtes^o three
 280 And weeneth^o that he be at home in Chepe,
 He is in Spaine, right at the town of Lepe,
 Not at The Rochele^o ne at Burdeaux^o toun;
 And thanne will he sayn "Sampsoun, Sampsoun."⁷
 But herkneth, lordings, one word I you pray,
 285 That alle the sovereign actes,^o dare I say,
 Of victories in the Olde Testament,
 Through verray God that is omnipotent,
 Were doon in abstinence and in prayere:
 Looketh^o the Bible and there ye may it lere.^o
 290 Look Attila,⁸ the grete conquerour,
 Died in his sleep with shame and dishonour,
 Bleeding at his nose in drunkenesse:
 A capitain should live in sobrenesse.
 And overall this, aviseth you^o right well
 295 What was commanded unto Lamuel⁹—
 Not Samuel, but Lamuel, say I;
 Redeth the Bible and find it expressly,
 Of wine-yiving^o to them that han^o justise.
 No more of this, for it may well suffice.
 300 And now that I have spoken of gluttony,
 Now will I you defenden hasardry:^o
 Hasard is verray^o mother of lesinges,^o
 And of deceit and cursed forsweringes,^o
 Blaspheme of Christ, manslaughter, and waste also
 305 Of catel^o and of time; and furthermo,
 It is reprove^o and contrary of honour
 For to been holden^o a commune hasardour,^o

And ever the higher he is of estate
 The more is he yholden desolate.^o
 310 If that a prince useth hasardry,^o
 In alle governance and policy^o
 He is, as by commune opinioun,
 Yholde the lesse^o in reputacioun.
 Stilbon,¹ that was a wise ambassadour,
 315 Was sent to Corinthe in full great honour
 From Lacedomye^o to make their alliaunce,
 And when he came him happede^o parchaunce^o
 That all the greatest that were of that lond
 Playing at the hasard he them fond,^o
 320 For which as soone as it mighte be
 He stole him^o home again to his country,
 And saide, "There will I not lose my name,
 N'I will not take on me so great defame^o
 You to ally unto none hasardours.^o
 325 Sendeth othere wise ambassadours,
 For by my trouthe, me were levere^o die
 Than I you should to hasardours ally.
 For ye that been so glorious in honoures
 Shall not ally you with hasardoures
 330 As by my will, ne as by my treaty."
 This wise philosophre, thus saide he.
 Look eek^o that to the king Demetrius
 The King of Parthes,^o as the book saith us,
 Sente him a pair of dice of gold in scorn,
 335 For he had used hasard therebiforn,²
 For which he held his glory or his renoun^o
 At no value or reputacioun.
 Lordes may finden other manner play^o
 Honest^o enough to drive the day away.
 340 Now will I speak of oathes false and great
 A word or two, as olde bookes treat:
 Great^o swearing is a thing abominable,

And false swearing is yet more reprevable.^o
 The heighe God forbad swearing at all—
 345 Witnesse on Mathew.³ But in special
 Of swearing saith the holy Jeremie,⁴
 "Thou shalt swere sooth^o thine oathes and not lie,
 And swear in doom^o and eek in rightwisnesse,^o
 But idle^o swearing is a cursednesse."^o
 350 Beholde and see that in the firste Table^o
 Of heigh Goddes heestes^o honorable
 How that the second heeste of him is this:
 "Take not my name in idle or amiss."⁵
 Lo, rather^o he forbedeth such swearing
 355 Than homicide,⁶ or many a cursed thing.
 I say that as by ordre thus it stondeth—
 This knoweth that^o his heestes^o understondeth
 How that the second heeste of God is that.
 And further over,^o I will thee tell all plat^o
 360 That vengeance shall not parten^o from his hous
 That^o of his oathes is too outrageous.⁷
 "By Goddes precious heart!" and "By his nails!"
 And "By the blood of Christ that is in Hailes,⁸
 Sevene is my chaunce,^o and thine is cink^o and
 365 traye!"^o
 "By Goddes armes, if thou falsly playe
 This dagger shall throughout thyn herte go!"
 This fruit cometh of the bicched bones^o two—
 Forswearing, ire, falsnesse, homicide.
 Now for the love of Christ that for us died,
 370 Let^o your oathes, bothe grete and smale.
 But sires, now will I telle forth my tale.
 These riotoures^o three of whiche I telle,
 Long erst er prime^o rung of any belle,
 Were set them in a taverne to drinke,
 375 And as they sat they heard a belle clinke
 Biforn a cors^o was caried to his grave.

That one of them gan callen to his knave:°
 "Go bet,"° quod he, "and axe readily°
 What cors° is this that passeth here forby,°
 380 And look that° thou report his name well."
 "Sir," quod this boy, "it needeth neveradel:°
 It was me told er° ye cam here two houres.
 He was, pardee,° an old fellow of youres,
 And suddenly he was yslain tonight,°
 385 Fordrunke° as he sat on his bench upright;
 There came a privy° thief men clepeth° Death,
 That in this country all the people sleeth,°
 And with his spear he smoot° his heart atwo,°
 And went his way withouten wordes mo.°
 390 He hath a thousand slain this pestilence.°
 And master, er° ye come in his presence,
 Me thinketh that it were° necessary
 For to be ware of such an adversary;
 Beth° ready for to meet him evermore:
 395 Thus taughte me my dame.° I say no more."
 "By Sainte Marie!" said this taverner,
 "The child saith sooth, for he hath slain this yere,
 Henne° over a mile, within a great village,
 Bothe man and woman, child and hine° and page.
 400 I trowe° his habitacioun° be there.
 To been avised° great wisdom it were°
 Er° that he did a man a dishonour."°
 "Ye, Goddes armes!" quod this riotour,
 "Is it such peril with him for to meet?
 405 I shall him seeke by way and eek by street,°
 I make avowe to Goddes digne° bones.
 Herkneth,° felawes, we three been al ones:°
 Let each of us hold up his hand to other
 And each of us become otheres brother,
 410 And we will sleen° this false traitour Death.
 He shall be slain, he that so many sleeth,

By Goddes dignity, er^o it be night."

420 Togidres han these three their trouthes plight¹
To live and dien^o each of them with other,
As though he were his owene ybore^o brother.
And up they sterte,^o all drunken in this rage,
And forth they goon^o towardses that village
Of which the taverner hadde spoke biforn.^o
425 And many a grisly^o oath then han^o they sworn,
And Christes blessed body they torete:^o
Death shall be dead if that they may him hente.^{o2}

When they han goon not fully half a mile,
Right as they would han treden^o over a stile,^o
430 An old man and a povre^o with them mette.
This olde man full mekely them grette^o
And saide thus, "Now lordes, God you see."^o

The proudest of these riotoures three
Answerd again,^o "What, carl^o with sorry
grace,^o
435 Why artou all forwrapped^o save^o thy face?
Why livestou^o so long in so great age?"
This olde man gan look in his visage,^o
And saide thus, "For^o I ne can not finde
A man, though that I walked into Inde,^o
440 Neither in city ne in no village,
That wolde change^o his youthe for myn age;
And therefore moot^o I han^o myn age stille,
As longe time as it is Goddes wille.

Ne Death, alas, ne will not have my lif.
445 Thus walk I like a resteleees caitif,^o
And on the ground, which is my mother's gate,
I knokke with my staff both early and late,³
And saye, 'Leve^o mother, let me in:
Lo, how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin.
Allas, when shall my bones been at rest?
450 Mother, with you would I change^o my chest^o

That in my chamber longe time hath be,
 Ye, for an haire-clout^o to wrappe me.'
 But yet to me she will not do that grace,^o
 For which full pale and welked^o is my face.
 455 But sires, to you it is no courtesy
 To speken to an old man villainy,^o
 But^o he trespass^o in word or else in deed.
 In Holy Writ ye may yourself well read,
 'Agains^o an old man, hoar upon his head,⁴
 460 Ye shall arise.'⁵ Wherefore I give you reed,^o
 Ne doth unto an old man none harm now,
 Nam^o than that ye would^o men did to you
 In age, if that ye so long abide.^o
 And God be with you where^o ye go^o or ride:
 465 I moot^o go thither as^o I have to go."
 "Nay, olde churl, by God thou shalt not so,"
 Said this other hasardour^o anon.
 "Thou partest not so lightly,^o by Saint John!
 Thou spake^o right now of thilke^o traitour Death,
 470 That in this country all our frendes sleeth:
 Have here my trouthe,^o as thou art his espye,^o
 Tell where he is, or thou shalt it aby,^o
 By God and by the holy sacrament!
 For soothly^o thou art one of his assent^o
 475 To sleen^o us yonge folk, thou false thief."
 "Now sires," quod he, "if that you be so lief^o
 To finde Death, turn up this crooked way,
 For in that grove I left him, by my fay,^o
 Under a tree, and there he will abide:^o
 480 Not for your boast he will him nothing^o hide.
 See ye that oak? Right there ye shall him find.
 God save you, that bought again^o mankind,
 And you amend." Thus said this olde man.
 And everich^o of these riotoures ran
 485 Till he came to that tree, and there they found

Of florins^o fine of gold ycoined round
Well nigh an eighte busshels,^o as them
thought—

Ne longer then after Death they sought,
But each of them so glad was of the sight,
490 For that the florins been so faire and bright,
That down they set them^o by this precious hoard.
The worst of them he spak the firste word:

“Bretheren,” quod he, “take keep^o what that I say:
My wit is great though that I bourde^o and play.

495 This treasure hath Fortune unto us given
In mirth and jolity our life to liven,
And lightly^o as it cometh so will we spende.
Ey,^o Goddes precious dignity, who wende^o
Today that we should han^o so fair a grace?^o
500 But might this gold be caried from this place
Hoom to myn house—or elles^o unto youres—
For well ye woot^o that all this gold is oures—
Then were^o we in high felicity.

But trewely, by day it might not be:
505 Men wolde sayn that we were thieves stronge,^o
And for our owene treasure doon us honge.^o
This treasure moste^o ycaried be by nighte,
As wisely and as slyly as it mighte.

Therefore I rede that cut^o amongst us alle
510 Be drawe, and let see where the cut^o will falle;
And he that hath the cut with herte blithe^o
Shall runne to the town, and that full swithe,^o
And bring us bread and wine full prively;^o
And two of us shall keepen subtilly^o

515 This treasure well, and if he will not tarry,^o
When it is night we will this treasure carry
By one assent^o whereas^o us thinketh best.”
That one of them the cut brought in his fest^o
And bade them draw and look where it will falle;
520 And it fell on the youngest of them alle,

And forth toward the town he went anon.
 And also^o soon as that he was agon,^o
 That one of them spak^o thus unto that other:
 "Thou knowest well thou art my sworn brother;
 525 Thy profit will I telle thee anon:^o
 Thou woost^o well that our fellow is agon,
 And here is gold, and that full great plenty,
 That shall departed^o been among us three.
 But nonetheless, if I can shape^o it so
 530 That it departed were among us two,
 Had I not doon a frendes turn to thee?"
 The other answered, "I noot^o how that may be:
 He woot^o that the gold is with us twaye.^o
 What shall we doon? What shall we to him saye?"
 535 "Shall it be conseil?"^o said the firste shrewe.^o
 "And I shall tellen in a wordes fewe
 What we shall doon, and bringe it well aboute."
 "I graunte," quod that other, "out of doute,
 That by my trouthe I will thee not biwraye."^o
 540 "Now," quod the first, "thou woost well we be
 twaye,
 And two of us shall stronger be than one:
 Look when that he is set^o that right anon^o
 Arise as though thou woldest with him playe,
 And I shall rive^o him through the sides twaye,^o
 545 While that thou strugglest^o with him as in game,^o
 And with thy dagger look thou do the same;
 And then shall all this gold departed^o be,
 My deere frend, bitwixe^o thee and me.
 Then we may both our lustes^o all fulfill,
 550 And play at dice right at our owene will."
 And thus accorded been these shrewes twaye^o
 To sleen the third, as ye han heard me saye.
 This youngest, which that wente to the town,
 Full oft in heart he rolleth up and down^o
 555 The beauty of these florins new and brighte.

"O Lord," quod he, "if so were that I mighte
 Have all this treasure to myself allone,
 There is no man that liveth under the throne
 Of God that sholde live so murye^o as I."
 560 And at the last the fiend our enemy
 Put in his thought that he should poison beye,^o
 With which he mighte sleen^o his felawes tweye^o—
 Forwhy the fiend^o found him in such livinge
 That he had leave^o him to sorwe bringe:⁶
 565 For this was outrelly^o his full intente,
 To sleen them both, and never to repente.
 And forth he gooth^o—no longer would he tarry^o—
 Into the town unto a pothecarye,^o
 And prayed him that he him wolde selle
 570 Some poison that he might his rattes quelle,^o
 And eek^o there was a polcat in his hawe^o
 That, as he said, his capons had yslawe,^o
 And fain he wolde wreke him^o if he mighte
 On vermin that destroyed^o him by nighte.
 575 The pothecarye answerde, "Thou shalt have
 A thing that, also^o God my soule save,
 In all this world there is no creature
 That eat or drunk hath of this confiture^o—
 Not but the mountance^o of a corn^o of whete—
 580 That he ne shall his life anon forlete.^o
 Ye, sterve^o he shall, and that in lesse^o while
 Than thou wilt goon a paas^o not but a mile,
 The poison is so strong and violent."
 This cursed man hath in his hand yhent^o
 585 This poison in a box, and sith^o he ran
 Into the nexte street unto a man
 And borrowed of him large bottles three,
 And in the two his poison poured he—
 The thridde he kepte clene for his drinke,
 590 For all the night he shoop him^o for to swinke^o

In carrying of the gold out of that place.
 And when this rioter with sorry grace
 Had filled with wine his grete^o bottles three,
 To his fellows again repaireth^o he.
 595 What needeth it to sermon of it more?
 For right as they had cast^o his death before,
 Right so they han^o him slain, and that anon.
 And when that this was doon, thus spak^o that one:
 600 "Now let us sit and drink and make us merry,
 And afterward we will his body bury."
 And with that word it happed him par cas^o
 To take the bottle there^o the poison was,
 And drank, and yaf^o his fellow drink also,
 For which anon they storven^o bothe two.
 605 But certes^o I suppose that Avicen⁷
 Wroot never in no canon, ne in no *fen*,
 Mo^o wonder signes of empoisoning
 Than had these wrecches two er^o their ending:
 610 Thus ended been these homicides^o two,
 And eek the false empoisonere also.
 O cursed sin of alle cursednesse!
 O traitours^o homicide, O wickednesse!
 O gluttony, luxure,^o and hasardry!^o
 615 Thou blasphemour of Christ with villainy
 And oathes great of usage^o and of pride!
 Allas, mankind, how may it betide^o
 That to thy Creator which that thee wroughte,^o
 And with his precious herte-blood thee boughte,^o
 620 Thou art so false and so unkinde,^o allas?
 Now good men,⁸ God forgive you your trespass
 And ware^o you from the sin of avarice.
 Myn holy pardon may you alle warice^o—
 So^o that ye offer nobles^o or sterlinges,^o
 Or else silver brooches, spoones, ringes.
 625 Boweth your head under this holy bulle!^o

Cometh up, ye wives, offreth of youre wolle!^o
 Your name I entre here in my roll anon
 Into the bliss of hevene shall ye gon.
 I you assoile^o by myn high power,
 630 Ye that will offer, as clean^o and eek^o as clear^o
 As ye were born.—And lo, sires,⁹ thus I preach.
 And Jesu Christ that is our soules leech^o
 So graunte you his pardon to receive,
 For that is best; I will you not deceive.
 635 But sires, one word forgot I in my tale:
 I have relics and pardon in my male^o
 As fair as any man in Engeland,
 Which were me given by the Popes hand.
 If any of you will of devocioun
 640 Offren and han^o myn absolucioun,
 Come forth anon, and kneeleth here adoun,
 And mekely receiveth my pardoun,
 Or elles^o taketh pardon as ye wende,^o
 All new and fressh at every miles ende,
 645 So that^o ye offer alway newe and newe^o
 Nobles or pence^o which that be good and trewe.
 It is an honour to everich^o that is here
 That ye mowe^o have a suffisant^o pardoner
 T'assoile^o you in contrees^o as ye ride,
 650 For adventures^o which that may betide:^o
 Paraventure there may fall one or two
 Down off his horse and break his neck atwo;
 Look which a surety^o is it to you alle
 That I am in your fellowship yfalle,
 655 That may assoile^o you, both more and lasse,
 When that the soul shall from the body passe.
 I rede^o that oure Hoste shall begin,
 For he is most envoluped^o in sin.
 Com forth, sir Host, and offer first anon,
 660 And thou shalt kiss the relics everichon,

Ye, for a groat:° unbuckle anon thy purse.
 "Nay, nay," quod he, "then have I Christes curse!
 Let be," quod he, "it shall not be, so theeche!°
 Thou woldest make me kiss thyn olde breech°
 665 And swear it were a relic of a saint,
 Though it were with thy fundement depeint.°
 But, by the cross which that Sainte Elaine fond,°
 I would I had thy coilons° in myn hond,
 Instead of relics or of saintuary.°
 670 Let cut them off: I will thee help them carry.
 They shall be shrined° in an hogges turd."
 This Pardoner answerde not a word;
 So wroth° he was no word ne would he say.
 "Now," quod oure Host, "I will no longer play
 675 With thee, ne with none other angry man."
 But right anon the worthy Knight began,
 When that he saw that all the people lough,°
 "No more of this, for it is right enough.
 Sire Pardoner, be glad and merry of cheer,
 680 And ye, sire Host, that been to me so dear,
 I pray you that ye kiss the Pardoner;
 And Pardoner, I pray thee, draw thee near,
 And as we diden let us laugh and play."
 Anon they kissed and riden forth their way.
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Endnotes

- Note 6: "Riotous living": wild parties, tavern going, etc. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The devil's temple is the tavern, and all these sins—excess of drinking, eating, and swearing—are prominent in sermon literature directed against it. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: They tear to bits (by swearing by its members). [Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: The Pardoner here invokes a commonplace of medieval anti-Judaism, namely, that Jews were responsible for Christ's suffering during the Crucifixion. This accusation was used to justify Christian violence against medieval Jews.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Lines 195–300 draw especially from Innocent III, *On the Wretchedness of the Human Condition* (1195), a treatise instilling contempt for the physical world, and Jerome, *Against Jovinian* (393), a treatise denigrating women, sexuality, and marriage (see the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See Genesis 19:30–36.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Whoever would well search the histories (would learn).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Mark 6:21–28.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.), Roman philosopher, statesman, and tragedian; see his *Epistles* 83.18.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Occurring in a scoundrel.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: 1 Corinthians 6:13.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Philippians 3:18–19.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A philosophical joke, depending on the distinction between inner reality (substance) and outward appearance (accident). In the hands of cooks, substance turns into accident. The joke comes from Innocent III, *On the Wretchedness of the Human Condition* 2.17; but in Chaucer's day, the terms also had a theological application in explaining the new doctrine of transubstantiation (whereby the substance of bread and wine transforms into the body and blood of Christ). So, the joke gains an added edge by addressing current controversies (the Wycliffites challenged the doctrine of transubstantiation).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: 1 Timothy 5:6.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Proverbs 20:1.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: As a Nazirite, Samson was forbidden to drink wine (Judges 13:7).[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: A town on the southern coast of Spain, near the Portuguese border.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Fishstreet and Cheapside are London localities.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The Pardoner is joking at the illegal custom of adulterating the fine French wines of Bordeaux and La Rochelle with strong Spanish wine.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See lines 265–66.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Attila, king of the Huns (d. 453), who led attacks on the Roman Empire; this account of his death is given by the Greek historian Priscus, his contemporary.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink” (Proverbs 31:4).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: This and the following exemplum on Demetrius are drawn from the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury (ca. 1115–1180), though Chaucer or his scribes make a mistake about the name Stilbo (which should be Chilo).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: He had made a habit of gambling previously.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See Matthew 5:34.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Jeremiah; see Jeremiah 4:2.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A later commandment prohibits murder; see Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 23:12–14 (Vulgate; in English translations, 23:11).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An abbey in Gloucestershire that claimed to possess some of Christ’s blood.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: By highway and also by byway (that is, everywhere).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Together have these three pledged their word.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See Hosea 13:14.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This image of Earth as mother and the Old Man’s plea are drawn from the Latin poet Maximian (6th c. C.E.), *Elegy*

- 1.223–34.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: White-haired.[Return to reference 4](#)
 - Note 5: Leviticus 19:32.[Return to reference 5](#)
 - Note 6: Because the devil found him in such a way of life that he (the devil) had permission to bring him to sorrow.—The man is damned because he is planning murder, “and never to repent.”[Return to reference 6](#)
 - Note 7: Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037), Persian scientist and physician; his *Canon of Medicine* is divided into sections called *fens*.[Return to reference 7](#)
 - Note 8: The audience of the Pardoner’s usual homily.[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: The Pardoner’s immediate audience, the Canterbury pilgrims.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: St. Helena (ca. 248–ca. 330), mother of Emperor Constantine, was said to have discovered the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (this being an explanation for the conversion of Constantine’s Roman empire to Christianity).[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *once*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *practiced*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gaming* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *brothels*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *where* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *guitars*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *beyond their capacity*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *make*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *horrible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tear apart*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *broke*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *laughed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(female) tumblers*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *shapely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fruit vendors* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brothel workers* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wafer sellers* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attached* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lechery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unnaturally* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slept with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unknowingly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *full* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *order* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drunken* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except that madness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *persists* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wickedness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ruin* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cause* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *damnation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at what cost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *paid for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *without doubt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forbidden* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if a man knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moderate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *causes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *labor* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *delicious food*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the Apostle Paul)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *belly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Paul*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *red (wines)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *latrine (by vomiting)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(St. Paul)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bag*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cater to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *relishing appetite*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *marrow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweetly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spices*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frequents* [Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *sound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stuck pig*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concern for decency*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tomb*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intelligence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secrets* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *red (wines)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *particularly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for sale*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *cunningly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *close*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heady fumes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *swallows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *supposes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *La Rochelle* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Bordeaux*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distinguished deeds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consult* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consider*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *giving wine* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *administer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prohibit gambling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perjuries*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *considered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gambler*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shunned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *practices gambling*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *administration*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *less*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Lacedaemon (Sparta)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by chance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stole away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dishonor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gamblers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I would rather*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the Parthians* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *renown*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *amusement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honorable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frequent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reprehensible*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *Tablet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commandments*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sooner*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(he) that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commandments*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *plainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *depart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *five* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *three*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cursed bones (dice)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leave off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *profligates*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before 9 a.m.*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in front of a corpse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *servant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask promptly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *corpse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by this place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be sure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *there's no need*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain last night*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *blind drunk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stealthy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slays*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *struck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *during this bout of plague*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mother*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from here*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laborer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *home*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forewarned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *caused him offense*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *of one accord*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *horrible* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tore to shreds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *catch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stepped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fence-crossing*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *poor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *greeted*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *may God preserve you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *replied* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *churl*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bad luck to you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wrapped up* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *except*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *do you live*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *peered at his face*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *because*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *India*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *exchange*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *must* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *have*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wretch*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *exchange* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(property) chest*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *haircloth shroud*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *favor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *withered*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rudeness*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *offend*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in the presence of*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *advice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *no more* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *would wish*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *survive*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wherever* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *walk*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *must* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to the place*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gambler*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *easily*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *spoke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *conspiracy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you so desire* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not at all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(coins)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearly eight bushels' worth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay attention to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ah* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have supposed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gift (of God)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flagrant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have us hanged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I suggest that lots* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *short straw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glad heart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guard discreetly* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *common agreement* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wherever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fist*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gone away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spoke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *divided*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *manage*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *don't know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *villain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *betray*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seated* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *right away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stab* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *struggle* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *play*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *divided*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desires*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two scoundrels*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turns over*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *merrily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because the devil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *permission*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wholly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goes* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *apothecary (druggist)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenge himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were ruining*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concoction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amount* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forfeit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shorter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *after*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was preparing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *work*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *big*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *returns*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plotted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spoke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by chance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *murderers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *treacherous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lechery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gambling*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *habit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unnatural*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preserve*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *save*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gold coins* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *silver coins*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *edict*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wool*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *absolve*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *innocent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bag*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ride along*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *over and over*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(units of money)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *should* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *competent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *absolve* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *places*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against contingencies* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *insurance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *absolve*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *propose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enveloped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *groat (fourpence)*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *as I thrive*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *breeches*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stained from your anus*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *found*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *balls, testicles*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reliquary*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *enshrined*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *angry*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *were laughing*[Return to reference °](#)

The Nun's Priest's Tale

In the framing story, *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is linked to a dramatic exchange that follows *The Monk's Tale*. The Monk has told a series of brief "tragedies," the common theme of which is the downfall of famous men (and one woman) when Fortune suddenly shifts course. Since the Monk's string of glum narratives promises to go on and on monotonously, the Knight eventually interrupts and politely tells the Monk that his stories are too painful. The Host chimes in to say that the tragedies are "not worth a butterfly" and asks the Monk to try another subject—but the Monk is offended and refuses. The Host then turns to the Nun's Priest, that is, the priest who is accompanying the Prioress. (The three priests said in *The General Prologue* to be traveling with the Prioress have apparently been reduced to one.)

The Nun's Priest's Tale is an example of the literary genre known as the "animal fable," familiar from the fables of Aesop, in which animals, behaving like human beings, exemplify moral lessons. In the Middle Ages, fables often functioned as elementary texts to teach boys Latin. Marie de France's fables in French are the earliest known vernacular translations (on Marie, see [pp. 159–90](#)). This particular fable derives from an episode in the twelfth-century French *Roman de Renard*, a "beast epic," which satirically represents a feudal animal society ruled over by Noble the Lion. Reynard the Fox is a wily trickster hero who is constantly preying upon and outwitting the other animals, although sometimes Reynard himself is outwitted.

In *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, morals proliferate: both the priest-narrator and his hero, Chauntecleer the rooster, spout examples, learned allusions, proverbs, and sententious generalizations, often in highly inflated rhetoric. The simple beast fable thus becomes a delightful satire of learning and moralizing and of the pretentious rhetoric by which medieval writers sometimes sought to elevate their

works. Among them, we may include Chaucer himself, who in this tale seems to be making fun of some of his own compositions, like the didactic tragedies that made up *The Monk's Tale*.

A povre^o widow somdel stape^o in age
Was whilom^o dwelling in a narrow^o cottage,
Beside a grove, standing in a dale:
This widow of which I tell you my tale,
5 Sin^o thilke^o day that she was last a wife,
In patience led a simple life.
For little was her catel^o and her rent,^o
By husbandry^o of such as God hire^o sent
She fond^o herself and eek^o her daughters two.
10 Three large sowes hadde she and namo,^o
Three kin,^o and eek a sheep that highte^o Mall.
Full sooty was her bour^o and eek her hall,^o
In which she ate full many a slender^o meal;
Of poinant^o sauce hire^o needed never a deel:^o
15 No dainty morsel passed through her throat—
Her diet was accordant to her cote.^o
Repleccioun^o ne made hire^o never sick:
Attempre^o diete was all her physik,^o
And exercise and hertes suffisaunce.^o
20 The goute let hire nothing for to daunce,¹
N'apoplexye shente^o not her head.
No win ne drank she, neither white ne red:
Her board^o was served most with white and
black,^o
Milk and brown bread, in which she found no lack;^o
25 Seind^o bacon, and sometime an ey^o or tweye,^o
For she was as it were a manere deye.^o
A yard she had, enclosed all without
With stickes, and a drye ditch about,
In which she had a cock heet^o Chauntecleer:²
30 In all the land of crowing nas^o his peer.
His voice was merrier than the merry orgon^o
On massedayes^o that in the churche gon;^o
Well sikerer^o was his crowing in his logge^o

Than is a clock or an abbey orlogge;^o
 By nature he knew each ascensioun
 35 Of th'equinoxial³ in thilke^o toun:
 For when degrees fifteene were ascended,
 Thenne crew^o he that it mighte not be amended.^o
 His comb was redder than the fine coral,
 And batailed^o as it were a castle wall;
 40 His bill was black, and as the jet it shoon;^o
 Like azure^o were his legges and his toon;^o
 His nailes whiter than the lily flour,
 And like the burned^o gold was his colour.
 This gentil^o cock had in his governaunce
 45 Seven hennes^o for to do all his plesaunce,^o
 Whiche were his sisters and his paramours,^o
 And wonder like to him as of colours;⁴
 Of whiche the fairest hewed^o on her throat
 Was cleped^o faire damoisele^o Pertelote.
 50 Curteis^o she was, discreet, and debonaire,^o
 And compaignable,^o and bore herself^o so faire,
 Sin^o thilke^o day that she was seven night old,
 That trewely^o she hath the heart in hold^o
 Of Chauntecleer, loken^o in every lith.^o
 55 He loved hire^o so that well was him therewith.
 But such a joy was it to hear them sing,
 When that the brighte sonne^o gan to spring,^o
 In sweet accord "My lief is faren in londe."⁵
 For thilke time,^o as I have understond,
 60 Beastes and birdes couden speak and sing.
 And so befell that in a dawening,^o
 As Chauntecleer among his wives all
 Sat on his perche, that was in the hall,
 And next him sat this faire Pertelote,
 65 This Chauntecleer gan gronen^o in his throat,
 As man that in his dream is drecched sore.^o
 And when that Pertelote thus heard him roar,

She was aghast, and said, "Herte deare,
 What aileth you to groan in this manere?
 70 You been a verray slepere, o fie, for shame!"
 And he answered and saide thus, "Madame,
 I pray you that you take it not agrief. o
 By God, me mette o I was in such mischief o
 Right now, that yet my heart is sore afright.
 75 Now God," quod o he, "my swevene recche aright, o
 And keepe my body out of foul prisoun!
 Me mette how that I roamed up and down
 Within oure yard, wheras I saw a beast,
 Was like an hound and would have made arrest o
 80 Upon my body, and have had me dead. o
 His colour was bitwixe o yellow and red,
 And tipped was his tail and both his eres o
 With black, unlike the remenant o of his heres; o
 His snoute small, with glowing eyen o tweye. o
 85 Yet o of his look for fear almost I deye: o
 This caused me my groaning, douteless."
 "Avoi," o quod she, "fie on you, herteless! o
 Alas," quod she, "for by that God above,
 Now have you lost my heart and all my love!
 90 I cannot love a coward, by my faith.
 For certes, o what so o any woman saith,
 We alle desiren, if it mighte be,
 To have husbandes hardy, wise, and free, o
 And secree, o and no nigard, o ne no fool,
 95 Ne him that is aghast o of every tool, o
 Ne none avauntour. o By that God above,
 How dorste o you sayn for shame unto youre love
 That anything might make you aferd? o
 Have you no mannes heart and have a berd? o
 100 Alas, and conne o you been aghast of swevenes? o
 Nothing, God woot, o but vanity o in swevene is!
 Swevenes engendren of replexiouns, o

And oft of fume^o and of complexiouns,^o
When humours been too habundant in a wight.⁸
105 Certes,^o this dream which you have met^o tonight
Comth of the grete superfluitee^o
Of youre rede colera,^o pardee,^o
Which causeth folk to dreaden^o in their dreames
Of arrows, and of fire with rede lemes,^o
110 Of rede beastes, that they will them bite,
Of contek,^o and of whelpes^o great and lite^o—
Right^o as the humour of melancholy
Causeth full many a man in sleep to cry
For fear of blacke bears or bulles^o blake,
115 Or elles^o blacke develes^o will them take.
Of other humours could I tell also
That werken many a man in sleep full woe,^o
But I will pass as lightly^o as I can.
Lo, Catoun,⁹ which that was so wise a man,
120 Said he not thus? 'Ne do no force of^o dreams.'
Now, sire," quod she, "when we fly from the beams,^o
For Goddes love, as take some laxatif.
Up^o peril of my soul and of my lif,
I conseile^o you the best, I will not lie,
125 That both of choler and of melancholy
You purge you; and for^o you shall not tarry,^o
Though in this town is no apothecary,
I shall myself to herbes teachen you,
That shall been for your health and for youre prow.^o
130 And in oure yard tho^o herbes shall I finde,
The which have of their property by kinde^o
To purge you beneath and eek above.^o
Forget not this, for Goddes owene love.
You been full cholerick^o of complexioun;
135 Ware^o the sun in his ascencioun
Ne finde you not replete of^o humours hote;^o
And if it do, I dare well lay a grote^o

That you shall have a fevere terciane,¹
 Or an ague that may be youre bane.^o
 140 A day or two you shall have digestives^o
 Of wormes, er^o you take youre laxatives
 Of lauriol, centaure, and fumetere,²
 Or elles^o of hellebore that groweth there,
 Of catapuce^o or of gaiter berries,
 145 Of herb ivy growing in our yard there merry is.^o
 Peck them up right as they grow, and eat them in.
 Be merry,^o husbände, for youre father^o kin!
 Dreadeth no dream: I can say you no more."
 "Madam," quod he, "*graunt mercy* ^o of
 150 youre lore.^o
 But nathelees,^o as touching daun^o Catoun,
 That hath of wisdom such a great renoun,^o
 Though that he bade no dreames for to dread,
 By God, men may in olde bookes read
 Of many a man more of authority
 155 Than ever Catoun was, so mote I thee,^o
 That all the reverse^o say of his sentence,^o
 And have well founden by experience
 That dreames been significaciouns^o
 As well of joy as tribulaciouns
 160 That folk endure in this life present.
 There needeth make of this no argument:
 The verray preve^o showeth it in deed.
 "One of the greatest auctours^o that men read³
 Saith thus, that whilom^o two felawes^o went
 165 On pilgrimage in a full good intent,^o
 And happed so they comen in a toun,
 Wheras there was such congregacioun
 Of people, and eek^o so strait of herbergage,^o
 That they ne found as much as one cottage
 170 In which they bothe might ylodged^o be;
 Wherefore they mosten^o of necessity

As for that night departen^o company;
And each of them gooth to his hostelry,^o
And took his lodging as it wolde fall.^o
175 That one of them was lodged in a stall,
Far^o in a yard, with oxen of the plough;
That other man was lodged well enough,
As was his aventure^o or his fortune,
That us governeth all as in commune.^o
180 And so befell that long er^o it were day,
This man mette^o in his bed, thereas he lay,
How that his felawe^o gan^o upon him call,
And said, 'Alas, for in an oxes stall
This night I shall be murdered where I lie!
185 Now help me, deare brother, or I die!
In all haste come to me,' he said.
 "This man out of his sleep for fear abraid,^o
But when that he was wakened of his sleep,
He turned him and took of this no keep:^o
190 Him thought his dream nas but a vanitee.⁴
Thus twice in his sleeping dreamed he,
And atte thirddde time yet his felawe
Came, as him thought, and said, 'I am now slawe:^o
Behold my bloody woundes deep and wide.
195 Arise up early in the morwe tide^o
And atte west gate of the town,' quod^o he,
'A carte full of dung there shaltou^o see,
In which my body is hid full prively:^o
Do thilke cart arresten^o boldely.
200 My gold caused my murder, sooth^o to sayn'—
And told him every point how he was slain,
With a full pitous^o face, pale of hue.
And truste well, his dream he found full true,
For on the morwes^o as soon as it was day,
205 To his felawes inn^o he took the way,
And when that he came to this oxes stall,

After^o his fellow he began to call.
 "The hosteller^o answered him anon,^o
 And saide, 'Sire, youre fellow is agon:^o
 210 As soon as day he went out of the toun.'
 "This man gan fallen in suspecioun,^o
 Remembring on his dreames that he mette;^o
 And forth he gooth, no longer would he lette,^o
 215 Unto the west gate of the town, and fond^o
 A dung carte, went as^o it were to dunge^o lond,
 That was arrayed in that same wise^o
 As you have heard the dede^o man devise;^o
 And with an hardy heart he gan to cry,
 'Vengeance and justice of this felony!
 220 My felawe murdered is this same night,
 And in this cart he lies gaping upright!^o
 I cry out on the ministers,'^o quod he,
 'That sholde keep and rulen this citee.
 Harrow,^o alas, here lith my felawe slain!
 225 What should I more unto this tale sayn?
 The people up start^o and caste the carte to ground,
 And in the middle of the dung they found
 The dede^o man that murdered was all new.^o
 "O blissful God that art so just and true,
 230 Lo, how that thou biwrayest^o murder alway!
 Murder will out,^o that see we day by day:
 Murder is so wlatson^o and abominable
 To God that is so just and reasonable,
 That he ne will not suffer it heled^o be,
 235 Though it abide^o a year or two or three.
 Murder will out: this my conclusioun.
 And right anon ministers of that toun
 Han hent^o the carter and so sore^o him pined,^o
 And eek^o the hosteller so sore engined,^o
 240 That they biknewe^o their wickedness anon,^o
 And were anhanged^o by the nekke bon.^o
 Here may men see that dreames been to dread.^o

"And certes,^o in the same book I read—
 Right in the nexte chapitre after this⁵—
 245 I gabbe not,^o so have I joy or bliss—
 Two men that would have passed over sea
 For certain cause^o into a far country,
 If that the wind ne hadde been contrary
 That made them in a city for to tarry,
 250 That stood full merry upon an haven^o side—
 But on a day again the even tide^o
 The wind gan change, and blewe right as them
 leste:^o
 Jolif^o and glad they wenten unto rest,
 And casten them^o full early for to sail.
 255 "But to that one man fell^o a great mervail;^o
 That one of them, in sleeping as he lay,
 Him mette^o a wonder dream again^o the day:
 Him thought a man stood by his beddes side,
 And him commanded that he should abide,^o
 260 And said him thus, 'If thou tomorrow wend,^o
 Thou shall be dreint;^o my tale is at an end.'
 "He woke and told his felawe what he mette,^o
 And prayed him his viage^o for to lette;^o
 As for that day he prayed him to bide.^o
 265 "His felawe, that lay by his beddes side,
 Gan^o for to laugh, and scorned him full fast.
 'No dream,' quod he, 'may so my heart aghast^o
 That I will lette^o for to do my thinges.^o
 I sette not a straw by^o thy dreaminges,
 270 For swevenes been but vanitees and japes:⁶
 Men dream alday^o of owles or of apes,⁷
 And of many a maze^o therewithal—
 Men dream of thing that never was ne shall.^o
 But since I see that thou will here abide,
 275 And thus forslewthen^o willfully thy tide,
 God woot,^o it reweth me;^o and have good day.'

And thus he took his leave and went his way.
 But er^o that he had half his course ysailed—
 Noot I not why ne what meschaunce it ailed⁸—
 280 But casually^o the shippes bottom rent,^o
 And ship and man under the water went,
 In sight of othere shippes it beside
 That with them sailed at the same tide.
 And therefore, faire Pertelote so dear,
 285 By such examples olde maistou lere^o
 That no man sholde been too recchelees^o
 Of^o dreames, for I saye thee doutelees^o
 That many a dream full sore is for to dread.^o
 “Lo, in the life of Saint Kenelm⁹ I read—
 290 That was Kenulphus sone, the noble king
 Of Mercenrike^o—how Kenelm mette^o a thing
 A lite er^o he was murdered on a day.
 His murder in his avisioun^o he say.^o
 His norice^o him expounded^o everydel^o
 295 His swevene,^o and bade him for to keep him^o well
 For^o treason, but he nas^o but seven year old,
 And therefore little tale hath he told
 Of any dream,¹ so holy was his herte.
 By God, I hadde levere than my sherte^o
 300 That you had read his legende^o as have I.
 “Dame Pertelote, I say you trewely,^o
 Macrobius,² that writ the Avisioun
 In Affrike^o of the worthy Scipioun,
 Affirmeth^o dreames, and saith that they been
 305 Warning of thinges that men after seen.
 “And furthermore, I pray you looketh well
 In the Olde Testament of Daniel,³
 If he held^o dreames any vanitee.^o
 “Read eek^o of Joseph,⁴ and there shall you see
 310 Wher^o dreames be sometimes—I saye not all—
 Warning of thinges that shall after fall.^o

"Look of Egypte the king, daun^o Pharaoh,
 His baker and his boteler^o also,⁵
 Wher^o they ne felte none effect^o in dreames.
 315 Whoso will seek actes^o of sundry remes^o
 May read of dreames many a wonder thing.
 "Lo Cresus,⁶ which that was of Lyde^o king,
 Mette^o he not that he sat upon a tree,
 Which signified he should anhangd^o be?
 320 "Lo here Andromache, Hectores^{o7} wife,
 That day that Hector sholde^o lose his life,
 She dreamed on the same night biforn^o
 How that the life of Hector sholde be lorn,^o
 325 If thilke^o day he went into batail;^o
 She warned him, but it mighte not avail:^o
 He wente for to fighte nathelees,^o
 But he was slain anon^o of Achilles.
 But thilke^o tale is all too long to tell,
 And eek^o it is nigh^o day, I may not dwell.^o
 330 Shortly I say, as for conclusioun,
 That I shall have of this avisioun^{o8}
 Adversity, and I saye furthermore
 That I ne tell of^o laxatives no store,
 For they been venomes,^o I woot^o it well:
 335 I them defy,^o I love them neveradel.^o
 "Now let us speak of mirth and stinte^o all this.
 Madame Pertelote, so have I bliss,
 Of one thing God hath sente me large^o grace:
 For when I see the beauty of youre face—
 340 You been so scarlet red about your eyen—
 It maketh all my drede for to dien.^o
 For also siker^o as *In principio*,⁹
Mulier est hominis confusio.¹
 Madame, the sentence^o of this Latin is,
 345 'Woman is mannes joy and all his bliss.'
 For when I feel anight youre softe side—

Al be it^o that I may not on you ride,^o
For^o that oure perch is made so narrow, alas—
I am so full of joy and of solace^o
350 That I defy bothe swevene^o and dream.”
And with that word he flew down from the beam,
For it was day, and eek^o his hennes all,
And with a “chuk”^o he gan^o them for to call,
For^o he hadde found a corn^o lay in the yard.
355 Real^o he was, he was no more aferd:^o
He feathered^o Pertelote twenty time,
And trod her as ofte, er it was prime.²
He looketh as it were a grim leoun,^o
And on his toes he roameth up and doun:
360 Him deined nat^o to set his foot to ground.
He chukketh^o when he hath a corn yfound,
And to him rennen^o then his wives all.
Thus royal, as a prince is in his hall,
Leave I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,^o
365 And after will I tell his aventure.^o
When that the month in which the world began,
That highte^o March, when God first maked man,³
Was complete, and passed were also,
Since March biran,^o thirty days and two,
370 Befell that Chauntecleer in all his pride,
His sevene wives walking him beside,
Cast up his eyen to the brighte sonne—
That in the sign of Taurus had yronne^o
Twenty degrees and one and somewhat more—
375 And knew by kind,^o and by none other lore,^o
That it was prime, and crew^o with blissful stevene.^o
“The sun,” he said, “is clomben^o up in hevene
Fourty degrees and one and more, ywis.^o
Madame Pertelote, my worldes bliss,
380 Herkneþ these blissful birddes^o how they sing,
And see the freshe flowers how they spring:

Full is my heart of revel and solace."^o
 But suddenly him fell^o a sorrowful cas,^o
 For ever the latter end of joy is woe.
 385 God woot^o that worldly joy is soon ago,^o
 And if a rhethor^o coude fair endite,^o
 He in a chronicle saufly^o might it write,
 As for a sovereign notabilitee.^o
 Now every wise man let him herkne^o me:
 390 This story is also^o true, I undertake,^o
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,⁴
 That women hold in full great reverence.
 Now will I turn again to my sentence.^o
 A colfox^o full of sly iniquity,
 395 That in the grove hadde woned^o yeres three,
 By high imaginacion forncast,⁵
 The same night throughout the hedges brast^o
 Into the yard where Chauntecleer the fair
 Was wont,^o and eek^o his wives, to repair;^o
 400 And in a bed of wortes^o still he lay
 Til it was passed undren^o of the day,
 Waiting^o his time on Chauntecleer to fall,
 As gladly do these homicides^o all,
 That in await liggen^o to murder men.
 405 O false mordreour,^o lurking in thy den!
 O newe Scariot!⁶ Newe Geniloun!⁷
 False dissembler! O Greek Sinoun,⁸
 That broughtest Troy all outrely^o to sorwe!
 O Chauntecleer, accursed be that morwe^o
 410 That thou into the yard flew from the beames!
 Thou were full well ywarned by thy dreames
 That thilke^o day was perilous to thee;
 But what that God forwoot^o must needes^o be,
 After^o the opinion of certain clerkes.
 415 Witness on^o him that any perfect clerk is
 That in school^o is great altercacioun^o

In this mater, and great disputisoun,^o
 And hath been of an hundred thousand men.
 But I ne can not bulte^o it to the bren,^{o 9}
 420 As can the holy doctor Augustine,
 Or Boece, or the bishop Brawardine¹—
 Whether that Goddes worthy forwiting^o
 Straineth^o me nedely^o for to do a thing
 425 ("Nedely" clepe^o I simple necessity),²
 Or elles^o if free choice be granted me
 To do that same thing or do it not,
 Though God forwoot^o it er^o that I was
 wrought;^o
 Or if his witing^o straineth^o neveradel,^o
 But by necessity conditional³—
 430 I will not have to do of such matere.^o
 My tale is of a cock, as you may heare,
 That took his counsel of his wife with sorwe,
 To walken in the yard upon that morwe^o
 That he hadde met^o the dream that I you told.
 435 Womenes counsels^o been full ofte cold;^o
 Womanes counsel brought us first to woe,
 And made Adam from Paradise to go,⁴
 Thereas^o he was full merry and well at ease.
 But for^o I noot^o to whom it mighte displease
 440 If I counsel of women wolde blame,
 Pass over, for I said it in my game^o—
 Read auctours where they treat of such matere,
 And what they sayn of women you may heare—
 These been the cockes wordes and not mine:
 445 I can none harm of no woman divine.^o
 Fair in the sand to bathe hire^o merrily
 Lith^o Pertelote, and all her sisters by,
 Again^o the sun, and Chauntecleer so free^o
 Sang merrier^o than mermaid in the sea—
 450 For Physiologus⁵ saith sikerly^o

How that they singen well and merrily.
 And so befell that as he cast his eye
 Among the wortes^o on a butterfly,
 He was war^o of this fox that lay full low.
 455 Nothing ne liste him^o thenne for to crow,
 But cried anon "Cok cok!" and up he start,^o
 As man that was affrayed^o in his heart—
 For naturally a beast desireth flee
 From his contrarye^o if he may it see,
 460 Though he never erst^o hadde seen it with his eye.
 This Chauntecleer, when he gan him espy,
 He would have fled, but^o that the fox anon
 Saide, "Gentil^o sire, alas, where will you gon?^o
 Be you afraid of me that am your friend?
 465 Now certes,^o I were worse than a fiend^o
 If I to you wolde^o harm or villainy.
 I am not come your conseil for t'espy,^o
 But trewely^o the cause of my coming
 Was only for to herkne^o how that you sing:
 470 For trewely, you have as merry a steven^o
 As any angel hath that is in heaven.
 Therewith you have in music more feeling
 Than hadde Boece,⁶ or any that can sing.
 My lord your father—God his soule bless!—
 475 And eek^o youre mother, of her gentiless,^o
 Have in my house ybeen, to my great ease.^o
 And certes^o sire, full fain^o would I you please.
 "But for men speak of singing,⁷ I will say
 So might I brouke well mine eyen tway,⁸
 480 Save you, I hearde never man so singe
 As did youre father in the morweninge.^o
 Certes, it was of heart^o all that he song.^o
 And for to make his voice the more strong,
 He wolde so pain him^o that with both his eyen
 485 He moste^o winke, so loude would he cryen;

And standen on his tiptoon therewithal,
 And stretche forth his necke long and small;^o
 And eek^o he was of such discrecioun
 That there nas no man in no regioun
 490 That him in song or wisdom mighte pass.
 I have well read in Daun Burnel the Ass⁹
 Among his verse how that there was a cock,
 That, for^o a priestes son gave him a knock
 Upon his leg while he was young and nice,^o
 495 He made him for to lose his benefice.¹
 But certain, there is no comparisoun
 Bitwixe^o the wisdom and discrecioun
 Of youre father and of his subtlety.
 Now singeth, sire, for sainte^o charity!
 500 Let see, can you youre father countrefete?"^o
 This Chauntecleer his winges gan to bete,
 As man that could his treason^o not espy,
 So was he ravished with his flattery.
 Alas, you lordes, many a false flatour^o
 505 Is in youre court, and many a losengeour,^o
 That pleasen you well more, by my faith,
 Than he that soothfastnesse^o unto you saith!^o
 Readeth Ecclesiaste^o of flattery.²
 Beth war,^o you lordes, of their treachery.
 510 This Chauntecleer stood high upon his toes,
 Stretching his necke, and held his eyen close,
 And gan to crowe loude for the nones;³
 And daun^o Russel the fox start^o up atones,^o
 And by the gargat^o hente^o Chauntecleer,
 515 And on his back toward the woods him beer,^o
 For yet ne was there no man that him sued.^o
 O destiny that maist^o not been eschued!^o
 Alas that Chauntecleer flew from the beames!
 Alas his wife ne roughte not^o of dreames!
 520 And on a Friday fell^o all this mischaunce!

O Venus that art goddess of plesaunce,^o
 Sin that^o thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
 And in thy service did all his power^o—
 More for delight than world to multiply^o—
 525 Why woldestou suffer^o him on thy day to die?⁴
 O Gaufred,⁵ deare master sovereign,^o
 That, when thy worthy king Richard was slain
 With shot,^o complainedest^o his death so sore,
 Why ne had I now thy sentence^o and thy lore,^o
 530 The Friday for to chide as diden ye?
 For on a Friday soothly^o slain was he.
 Thenne would I show you how that I coude plain^o
 For Chauntecleres dread and for his pain.
 Certes,^o such cry ne lamentacioun
 535 Was never of ladies made when Ilioun⁶
 Was won, and Pyrrus⁷ with his straite swerd,^o
 When he had hent^o King Priam by the berd^o
 And slain him, as saith us Eneidos,⁸
 As maden alle the hennes in the clos,^o
 540 When they had seen of Chauntecleer the sight.
 But sovereignly^o Dame Pertelote shrigh^o
 Full louder than did Hasdrubales⁹ wife
 When that her husband had lost his life,
 And that the Romans hadden burned Carthage:
 545 She was so full of torment and of rage
 That willfully unto the fire she start,^o
 And burned herselfen with a stedefast heart.
 O woeful hennes, right so criden ye
 As, when that Nero¹ brende^o the city
 550 Of Rome, criden senatoures wives
 For that their husbandes losten alle their lives:
 Withouten guilt this Nero hath them slain.
 Now will I turn to my tale again.
 The sely^o widow and eek^o her daughters two
 555 Herden^o these hennes cry and maken woe,

And out at dores^o sterten^o they anon,
 And sien^o the fox toward the grove gon,^o
 And bar^o upon his back the cock away,
 And criden, "Out, harrow,"^o and "Wailaway,^o
 560 Ah, ah, the fox," and after him they ran,
 And eek^o with staves^o many another man;
 Ran Colle our dog, and Talbot and Gerland,^o
 And Malkin² with a distaff in her hand;
 Ran cow and calf, and eek the very hogges,
 565 So feared for^o the barking of the dogges
 And shouting of the men and women eke.^o
 They ranne so them thought their herte breke;^o
 They yelleden as fiendes do in hell;
 The duckes criden as men would them quell;³
 570 The geese for fere^o flowen^o over the trees;
 Out of the hive came the swarm of bees;
 So hidous was the noise, a, *benedicitee*,^o
 Certes,^o he Jakke Straw⁴ and his meinee^o
 Ne made never shoutes half so shrill
 575 When that they wolden any Fleming kill,
 As thilke^o day was made upon the fox.
 Of brass they broughten bemes^o and of box,^o
 Of horn, of bone, in whiche they blew and powped,^o
 And therewithal they skried^o and they howped^o—
 580 It seemed as that hevene sholde fall!
 Now goode men, I pray you herkneth^o all:
 Lo, how Fortune turneth^o suddenly
 The hope and pride eek^o of her enemy.
 This cock that lay upon the foxes back,
 585 In all his dread unto the fox he spak,^o
 And saide, "Sire, if that I were as ye,
 Yet should I say, as wise God helpe me,
 'Turneth again,^o you proude churles all!
 A verray^o pestilence^o upon you fall!
 590 Now am I come unto this wooded side,

Maugree your heed, ^o the cock shall here abide.
I will him eat, in faith, and that anon.' "^o

The fox answered, "In faith, it shall be done."
And as he spoke that word, all suddenly
595 The cock broke from his mouth deliverly, ^o
And high upon a tree he flew anon.

And when the fox saw that the cock was gone,
"Alas," quod ^o he, "O Chauntecleer, alas!
I have to you," quod he, "ydoon trespass, ^o
600 Inasmuch as I maked you aferd ^o
When I you hente ^o and brought out of the yerd. ^o
But sire, I did it in no wikke intent. ^o

Come down, and I shall tell you what I meant.
I shall saye sooth ^o to you, God help me so!"
605 "Nay thenne," quod he, "I shrewe ^o us bothe two:

But first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones,
If thou beguile me ofter than ones; ^o
Thou shall no more through thy flatterye
Do ^o me to sing and winken with my eye.
610 For he that winketh when he sholde see,
All willfully, God let him never thee." ^o

"Nay," quod the fox, "but God give him mischance ^o
That is so indiscreet of governance ^o
That jangleth ^o when he should holde his pees." ^o
615

Lo, such it is for to be recchelees ^o
And negligent and trust on flattery.
But you that holden this tale a folly
As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,
Taketh the morality, goode men.
620 For Saint Paul saith that all that written is
To oure doctrine ^o it is ywrit, ywis: ^o ⁵
Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff ^o be still.
Now goode God, if that it be thy will,
As saith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
625 And bring us to his high bliss! Amen.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Gout did not stop her dancing.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: His name means “sing beautifully.”[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, he knew by instinct each step in the progression of the celestial equator, which was thought to make a 360° rotation around the earth every twenty-four hours; a progression of 15° (line 37) would thus be equal to the passage of an hour.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: And marvelously similar to him in their coloring.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “My Lief Is Faren in Londe,” which is a real medieval song (see p. 602); its fifth line, “She hath myn herte in holde,” inspires line 54.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: May God interpret my dream for good.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Dreams have their origin in overeating.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: When humors (bodily fluids) are too abundant in a person. —It was believed that an excess in one of the four humors—black bile (melancholy), yellow bile (choler), phlegm (stolidity), and blood (cheerful spiritedness)—affected temperament.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Dionysius Cato (3rd or 4th c. C.E.), the supposed author of a collection of Latin moral maxims, the *Distichs*, used as an elementary textbook.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Tertian: recurring every third day.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Laureole (spurge laurel), centaury (a gentian), and fumitory: like the herbs mentioned in the next lines, common cathartics in medieval medicine. The tally of laxatives is a parody of rhetorical lists.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This refers to Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), Roman statesman, scholar, and orator; see his *De divinatione* (*On Divination*) 1.27.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: It seemed to him his dream was nothing but an illusion.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Earlier, not later, in the same chapter of *On Divination*, Cicero relates a dream similar to the following.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: For dreams are only illusions and tricks.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, of absurdities.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: I don't know why nor what was the trouble with it.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The son of Cenwulf (d. 821), whom he briefly succeeded as king of the Mercians before being slain by his sister (according to a well-known 11th-century legend).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: He set little store by any dream.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Latin grammarian and philosopher (fl. ca. 400 C.E.); his famous commentary on Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" (book 6 of *On the Republic*, ca. 52 B.C.E.)—a dream vision of the Roman general Scipio Aemilianus, who destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C.E.—came to be regarded as the standard authority on dream lore.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See Daniel 7–8, recounting the prophetic dreams of that ancient Hebrew prophet.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Genesis 37 and 41 recount, respectively, Joseph's prophetic dreams and his accurate interpretation of the Egyptian pharaoh's dreams.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In Genesis 40, Joseph interprets the dreams of the baker and cupbearer of the pharaoh.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Croesus (r. ca. 560–546 B.C.E.), last king of Lydia, who was overthrown by Cyrus the Great; Chaucer also tells his story as part of *The Monk's Tale*.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The greatest warrior among the Trojans during the Trojan War; he would be killed by the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Macrobius ranks dreams according to their truth value, from nightmares (least truthful) to visions (most); according to

- Chauntecleer, his dream is a vision.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The first phrase in John 1:1, in the Latin Vulgate translation: "In the beginning [was the Word]," a fundamental axiom of Christianity.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: "Woman is man's downfall" (Latin), an antifeminist maxim.[Return to reference 1](#)
 - Note 2: And trod her (while copulating) just as often (that is, twenty times) before it was 9 a.m.[Return to reference 2](#)
 - Note 3: It was a common medieval belief that God's creation took place in springtime.[Return to reference 3](#)
 - Note 4: The great knight of Arthurian romance, who was the lover of Queen Guinevere.[Return to reference 4](#)
 - Note 5: Predicted by heavenly forethought.[Return to reference 5](#)
 - Note 6: Judas Iscariot, the disciple known for betraying Jesus.[Return to reference 6](#)
 - Note 7: Ganelon, betrayer of Roland in the Charlemagne legend.[Return to reference 7](#)
 - Note 8: Sinon, who persuaded the Trojans to bring the horse filled with Greek warriors into Troy.[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: That is, separate the valid and invalid arguments.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: St. Augustine (354–430), Boethius (ca. 480–524), and Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1290–1349), archbishop of Canterbury, were all occupied with the interrelationship between human free will and God's foreknowledge.[Return to reference 1](#)
 - Note 2: For Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, "simple necessity" is absolute determination in relation to certain essential laws: if we are born, we must at some later point die. His "conditional necessity" allows a large measure of free choice within these larger rules: for example, whether to sit or stand at a given moment. The area in between these examples is the subject of academic contention (as, more to the point, are the nature and limits of human free will).[Return to reference 2](#)
 - Note 3: Or if his knowledge in no way constrains, except by conditional necessity. (See previous note.)[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: The first woman, Eve, persuaded Adam to break God's commandment; see Genesis 3:6.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "The Naturalist," the supposed author of a Greek collection (2nd century C.E., also called *Physiologus*) of moralizing and symbolical stories about animals (a bestiary).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Boethius wrote a treatise titled *De musica* (*On Music*).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: But since singing has been mentioned.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: So might I enjoy my two eyes (that is, as I live).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Master Brunellus, a discontented donkey, was the hero of *Speculum stultorum* (*Mirror of Fools*), a satirical poem by Nigel Wireker (ca. 1135–1198?).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Because the offended cock neglected to crow, his master overslept—missing his ordination and thus losing his benefice.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Perhaps Ecclesiasticus 12:16; but perhaps Proverbs 26:28, 28:23, or 29:5. The reference is both vague and sweeping.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This formula, "for the nones" (literally, "for the occasion"), is a common line-filler in Middle English rhyming verse.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Friday is Venus's day.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Geoffrey of Vinsauf, a famous medieval rhetorician whose *Poetria nova* (ca. 1210, *New Poetics*) contains a lament on the death of Richard I that scolds Friday, the day on which the king was fatally wounded.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Ilion or Ilium, another name for Troy (or the citadel of Troy).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Pyrrhus (son of Achilles), who killed Priam, king of Troy.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The *Aeneid* (19 B.C.E.), the Latin epic by Virgil; see 2.552–53.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Hasdrubal, leader of the Carthaginian army, surrendered and begged for mercy when Carthage was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C.E. To rebuke his cowardice, his wife killed their children and then threw their bodies and herself into a burning temple. Chaucer's version seems to assume that Hasdrubal was already dead.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Fifth Roman emperor (54–68 C.E.); according to legend, Nero not only set fire to Rome but put many senators to death.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Malkin is a maid's name: she holds a distaff, a staff used for spinning, and is often so pictured in medieval illustrations and carvings of a fox being pursued.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The ducks cried as if men wanted to kill them.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Jack Straw was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, an uprising that directed its violence against not only the aristocracy but also the Flemings (or Dutch-speaking people from the Low Countries) living in London.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Romans 15:4.[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *poor* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rather advanced* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *once* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the (very)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *property* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *income* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(thrifty) housekeeping* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *her* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *provided for* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *no more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bedroom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *living room*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scanty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pungent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *she* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not a bit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in keeping with her cottage*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *overeating* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moderate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *medicine*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *contentment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hurt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *table*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *milk and bread*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fault*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grilled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *egg* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a kind of dairywoman*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *organ*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Mass days* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plays*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more reliable* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coop*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clock, timepiece*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improved upon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crenellated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shone*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *lapis lazuli* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burnished* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hens* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lovers* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *colored* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *courteous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gracious* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *companionable* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behaved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in possession* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *locked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *completely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sun* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to rise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at that time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at dawn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began to groan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *troubled greatly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are a sound sleeper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amiss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trouble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laid hold* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *killed me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ears* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *rest* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hairs* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *two* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even now* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shame* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faintheart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *miser* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frightened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *weapon* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *braggart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *can* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreams* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *illusion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gas* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bodily humors* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excess* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *red bile* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be afraid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *red flames* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strife* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dogs* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *bulls*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *demons*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do harm to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay no heed to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rafters*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in order that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *benefit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nature*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *both bottom and top*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bilious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beware that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *filled with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bet a coin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *digestive medicines*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *caper spurge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where it is fertile*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cheer up* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *father's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many thanks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *instruction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nonetheless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *master*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fame*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may I prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *contrary* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *opinion*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *signifiers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *actual experience*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *authors*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *follows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with a very good intention*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *short of lodging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *had*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *part*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chance determined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *far away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *luck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *governs us all in common*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fellow, friend* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *started up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shall you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have that cart stopped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pitiable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lodging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *innkeeper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *has gone*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *began to feel suspicious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spread dung on*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *manner*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *describe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on his back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *officers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rushed out*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *recently*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disclose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be revealed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loathsome*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concealed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *severely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tortured*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *racked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confessed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hanged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neck bone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to be feared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I am not making this up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a particular reason*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harbor's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toward evening*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suited them*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *merry* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *planned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *marvel* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toward* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stay behind* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go forth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drowned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *journey* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wait* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *terrify* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *business* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *don't care a straw for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *constantly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delusion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nor shall be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *idle away* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I'm sorry* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by chance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *split* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *you can learn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *careless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *without a doubt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *should be feared greatly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Mercia* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a little before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(true) dream* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nurse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *interpreted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entirely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guard himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I would give my shirt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(saint's) life*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell you truly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Africa*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confirms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *considered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *illusion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whether*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lord*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *butler*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whether* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no consequence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *histories* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *various realms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Lydia*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hanged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Hector's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that same* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *battle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do any good*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nonetheless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *right away*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *near* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(divinely inspired) dream* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poisons* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reject* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not at all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stop* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generous* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *die* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just as certain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meaning* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ride (sexually)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vision* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cluck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *regal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *embraced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lion* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he disdained* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clucks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *run* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *feeding* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what happened to him* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is called* [Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *run*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *nature* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *teaching*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *crowed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *voice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *has climbed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *birds*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *befell* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *event*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knows* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gone*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rhetorician* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *compose*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *confidently*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *banner headline*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *listen to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *declare*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *main point*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fox with black markings*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dwelled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *broke*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *also* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *greens*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *midmorning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *biding*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *murderers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lie in wait*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *murderer*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *utterly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *morning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *that*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *foreknows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *necessarily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in, according to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take witness of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scholarship* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *controversy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disputation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sift* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *husks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foreknowledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *constrains* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *necessarily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foresaw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *created* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knowing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *constrains* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not at all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *subject matter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *morning* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *women's advice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fatal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *playfully* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *imagine* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lies* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more sweetly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surely* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *plants*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aware*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *he had no desire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *started*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enemy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *devil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to spy your secrets*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *voice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gentility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *satisfaction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *morning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heartfelt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sang*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take pains*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *had to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *imitate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *undoing by treason*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flatterer*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *deceiver*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *says*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Ecclesiasticus*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beware*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lord* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sprang* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pursued*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evaded*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took no notice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *befell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did his utmost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to populate the world*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would you allow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *supreme*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *an arrow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lamented*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wisdom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lament*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drawn sword*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preeminently* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shrieked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jumped*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *burned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *poor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outdoors* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leaped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bore*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *help* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alas*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wood planks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(dogs' names)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frightened by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hearts would break*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fear* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bless me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trumpets* [Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *tooted*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *whooped*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *overturns*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spoke*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go back!*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plague*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in spite of all you can do*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *right away*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nimbly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *said*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done wrong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *afraid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with no wicked intention*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *curse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more often than once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cause*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misfortune*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *conduct*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chatters* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *careless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for our instruction* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *husks*[Return to reference](#) °

Close of *The Canterbury Tales* At the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer invokes a common allegorical theme, that life on earth is a pilgrimage. As Chaucer puts it in his short moral lyric, the *Balade de bon conseil* ([p. 574](#)), "Here is noon home . . . / Forth, pilgrim, forth!" In the final fragment, he makes explicit a metaphor that has been implicit all along in the journey to Canterbury. The pilgrims never arrive at the shrine of St. Thomas, but in *The Parson's Tale*, and in its short introduction and in the *Retraction* that follows it, Chaucer seems to be making an end for two pilgrimages that have become one, that of his fiction and that of his life.

In the introduction to the final tale we find the twenty-nine pilgrims moving through a nameless little village as the sun sinks to within 29° of the horizon, low in the sky. The atmosphere contains something of both the chill and the urgency of a late autumn afternoon, and we are surprised to find that the pilgrimage is almost over, that there is need for haste to make that "good end" that every medieval Christian hoped for. This delicately suggestive passage, rich with allegorical overtones, introduces the extremely long penitential treatise that constitutes *The Parson's Tale*, which Chaucer translated from Latin or French sources. Although often assumed to be an earlier work belatedly incorporated into the tale-telling framework, it may well have been written by Chaucer to provide the ending for *The Canterbury Tales*.

In the *Retraction* that follows *The Parson's Tale*, Chaucer acknowledges, lists, revokes, and asks forgiveness for his "guilts" (that is, his sins), which consist of having written most of the works on which his reputation as a great poet depends. He thanks Christ and Mary for his religious and moral works. One need not take this as evidence of a spiritual crisis or conversion at the end of his life. The *Retraction* seems to have been written to appear at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, without censoring any of the tales deemed to be sinful. At the same time, one need not question Chaucer's sincerity; a readiness to question his own reality before the reality of

his God is implicit in many of Chaucer's works. The placement of the *Retraction* within or just outside the border of the fictional pilgrimage suggests that although Chaucer recognized the limitations of his fictions, he also believed that he and they were inseparable.

From The Parson's Prologue and Tale

The Parson's Prologue

By that^o the Manciple had his tale all ended,
The sonne^o from the south line^o was descended
So low, that he nas^o not to my sight
Degrees nine and twenty as in height.¹
Four of the clock it was, so as I guess,
5 For elevene foot, or little more or less,
My shadow was at thilke^o time as there,
Of such feet as^o my lengthe parted^o were
In six feet equal of proporcioun.²
Therewith the moones exaltacioun³—
10 I mean Libra—always^o gan ascend,
As we were entring at a thropes^o end.
For which our Host, as he was wont to gie^o
As in this case our jolly company,
Said in this wise, “Lordinges everichone,^o
15 Now lakketh us^o no tales more than one:
Fulfilled is my sentence^o and my decree;
I trowe^o that we han heard of each degree;^o
Almost fulfilled is all myn ordinaunce.^{o4}
I pray to God, so give him right good chance
20 That^o telleth this tale to us lustily.^o
Sir priest,” quod he, “artou^o a vicary,^o
Or arte a parson?⁵ Say sooth,^o by thy fay.^o
Be what thou be, ne break thou not our play,
For every man save thou hath told his tale.
25 Unbuckle and show us what is in thy male!^o
For trewely,^o me thinketh by thy cheere^o
Thou shouldest knit up^o well a great matere.^o
Tell us a fable anon,^o for cockes bones!”⁶
This parson answerd all atones,^o
30 “Thou getest^o fable none ytold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Timothee,⁷

Repreveth^o them that waiven
 soothfastnesse,^o
 And tellen fables and such wrecchednesse.
 Why sholde I sowen^o draf^o out of my fest,^o
 35 When I may sowen wheat if that me lest?^o
 For which I say that if you list^o to hear
 Morality and virtuous matere,
 And then that ye will give me audience,
 I will full fain,^o at Christes reverence,
 40 Do you plesance lefevel^o as I can.
 But trusteth well, I am a southern man:
 I can not geeste rum-ram-ruf by letter⁸—
 Ne, God woot,^o rhyme holde^o I but little better.
 And therefore, if you list, I will not glose;^o
 45 I will you tell a merry tale in prose,
 To knit up all this feast and make an end.
 And Jesus, for his grace, wit me send
 To shewe^o you the way in this voyage
 Of thilke^o perfect glorious pilgrimage
 50 That highte^o Jerusalem celestial.
 And if ye vouchesauf,^o anon^o I shall
 Begin upon my tale, for which I pray
 Telle your avis:^o I can no better saye.
 But nonetheless, this meditacioun
 55 I put it ay^o under correccioun
 Of clerkes, for I am not textuel:^o
 I take but the sentence,^o trusteth well.
 Therefore I make protestacioun^o
 That I will stonde^o to correccioun.”
 60 Upon this word we han^o assented soon,
 For, as it seemed, it was for to doon^o
 To enden in some virtuous sentence,^o
 And for to give him space and audience;
 And bade our Host he sholde to him say
 65 That alle we to tell his tale him pray.

Our Hoste had the wordes for us all:
"Sir priest," quod he, "now faire you befall:
Say what you list, and we will gladly heare."
And with that word he said in this manere:
70 "Telleth," quod he, "your meditacioun.
But hasteth you, the sonne^o will adown.
Beth fructuous,^o and that in little space,^o
And to do well God sende you his grace."

Endnotes

- Note 1: Chaucer establishes the afternoon setting with reference to the heavens: the sun declines from its noontime position, shadows lengthen, the moon is at least rhetorically visible (as opposed to the young sun in *The General Prologue*, lines 7–8), and the number of degrees of the setting sun, in line 4, just happens to equal the number of the original pilgrim company (*General Prologue*, line 24).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Chaucer measures time by his shadow's length and by the angular height of the sun above the horizon.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The astrological sign in which the moon's influence is dominant.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Host now speaks as if the contract in *The General Prologue* for four tales per pilgrim has been fulfilled or revoked. The game is "almost fulfilled" (line 19); the pilgrims agree to "enden" it (line 63).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A parson holds the benefice of a parish and takes its income; a vicar, appointed at a lesser salary, serves in place of an absentee parson. This parson, however, is exemplary, and stays with his flock.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A euphemism for "God's bones."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In 1 Timothy 1:4.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, tell stories in alliterative measure. The Host may allude to *Piers Plowman* in line 74 ("do well" and "grace"), but

“geeste” here suggests medieval romance—a poem like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wars of Alexander*, or *The Siege of Jerusalem*.[Return to reference 8](#)

Notes

- °: *by the time that*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sun* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meridian*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *was*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *that same*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as if* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *divided*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *steadily*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *village's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed to lead*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gentlemen every one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *we are short of*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *purpose*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *believe* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *from each rank*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *plan*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *who* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasingly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are you* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *vicar*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the truth* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *faith*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bag*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *truly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *expression*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *conclude* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *matter*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *at once*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *are getting*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reproaches*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *depart from the truth*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sow* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chaff* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fist*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it pleases me*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *want*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lawful pleasure*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knows* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *consider*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *use fancy language*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *show*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *that*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *is called*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *agree* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *speak your mind*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *constantly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *a scholar*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meaning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *public acknowledgment*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *be subject to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *have*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the right thing to do*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *doctrine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sun*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *edifying* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *a short time*[Return to reference °](#)

Chaucer's Retraction^{[1](#)}

HERE TAKETH THE MAKERE OF THIS BOOK HIS LEVE

Now pray I to them all that harken^o this little treatise or read, that if there be anything in it that liketh^o them, that thereof they thank our Lord Jesu Christ, of whom proceedeth all wit^o and al goodness. And if there be anything that displease them, I pray them also that they arrette^o it to the default^o of myn unconning,^o and not to my will, that would full fain^o have said better if I had had conning.^o For our book saith, "All that is written is written for our doctrine,"^o ² and that is my intent. Wherefore I beseech you meekly, for the mercy of God, that ye pray for me that Christ have mercy on me and forgive me my guilts,^o and namely^o of my translations and enditings^o of worldly vanities, the which I revoke in my retractions: as is the book of Troilus;³ the book also of Fame;⁴ the book of the five and twenty Ladies;⁵ the book of the Duchess;⁶ the book of Saint Valentines day of the Parliament of Birds;⁷ the tales of Canterbury,⁸ thilke that sounen into sin;⁹ the book of the Leoun;¹ and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay,^o that Christ for his great mercy forgive me the sin. But of the translation of Boece *de Consolacione*,² and other books of legends of saints, and homilies, and morality and devotion, that thank I our Lord Jesu Christ and his blissful mother, and alle the saints of heaven, beseeching them that they from henceforth unto my lives end send me grace to bewail my guilts and to study to the salvation of my soul, and grant me grace of very penitence, confession, and satisfaction to do in this present life, through the benign grace of him that is king of kings and priest over all priests, that bought us with the precious blood of his heart, so that I may been one of them at the day of doom^o that shall be saved. *Qui cum Patre*, etc.³

Here is ended the book of the tales of Canterbury, compiled by
Geffrey Chaucer, of whose soul Jesus Christ have mercy. Amen.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The *Retraction* comes after *The Parson's Tale*, at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Romans 15:4.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: *Troilus and Criseyde*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *The House of Fame*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *The Legend of Good Women*. The extant text describes only ten women.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: *The Book of the Duchess*.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: *The Parliament of Birds*.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: *The Canterbury Tales*.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Those that tend toward, or are conducive to, sin.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *The Book of the Lion* has not survived.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (ca. 524 C.E.), translated by Chaucer as his *Boece*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: "Who with the Father" (Latin), short for "Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God through all the ages."[Return to reference 3](#)

Notes

- °: *who hear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleases*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *understanding*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *attribute*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fault*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *incompetence*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *skill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *instruction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sins*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *writings*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *song*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment*[Return to reference](#) °

LYRICS AND OCCASIONAL VERSE

In addition to his narrative verse, Chaucer wrote lyric poetry on the models of famous French and Italian poets who made lyric into a medieval art form aimed at learned and aristocratic audiences, an audience that included fellow poets. Chaucer also embedded lyric in narrative poetry. As an example of courtly lyric, we print a “song” that Troilus, the hero of Chaucer’s tragedy *Troilus and Criseyde*, makes up about his violent and puzzling emotions after falling in love. The song is actually Chaucer’s translation into rhyme royal of one of Petrarch’s sonnets, written more than a century before Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the sonnet form itself to England. In the fifteenth century, Troilus’s song was sometimes excerpted and included in anthologies of lyric poetry.

Chaucer also wrote moralizing ballades, including the *Balade de bon conseil* (Ballade of Good Advice), sometimes titled “Truth” by modern editors. A ballade is a verse form of three or more stanzas, each with an identical rhyme scheme and the same last line, the refrain. Often a ballade ends with a shorter final stanza, called an *envoy*, in which the poem is addressed or sent to a friend or patron, or, conventionally, to a “prince” or to “princes” in general. The good advice of *Balade de bon conseil* is to abandon worldly pursuits of wealth and power and to concentrate on the pilgrimage that leads to our true home in heaven. There are many copies of the ballade with only this heartfelt advice. The one printed below contains a humorous *envoy*, found in only a single manuscript, addressed to a “Vache” (French for “cow”), who is probably Sir Philip de la Vache.

The single stanza of *Chaucer’s Words to Adam Scriveyn* comically conveys the author’s exasperation at the sloppy work of a professional copyist. *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse* is a parody of a lover’s complaint to his lady: ladies, like coins, should be golden, and, like purses, they should not be “light” (fickle). The complaint survives both without and with an *envoy*. The addressee in the latter case is the recently crowned Henry IV, who is being

wittily implored to restore payment of Chaucer's annuity, which had been interrupted when the new king deposed Richard II.

Troilus's Song¹

If no love is, O God, what feel I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whence cometh my wo?
If it be wicked, ^o a wonder thinketh me, ^o
When every torment and adversity
5 That cometh of him may to me savory ^o thinke, ^o
For ay ^o thirst I, the more that I drinke.

And if that at my owne lust ^o I bren, ^o
From whence cometh my wailing and my plainte? ^o
If harm agree ^o me, whereto plaine ^o I then?
10 I noot, ^o nor why unwearie ^o that I fainte.
O quicke ^o death, O sweete harm so quainte, ^o
How may ^o of thee in me such quantity,
But if ^o that I consente that it be?

And if that I consent, I wrongfully
15 Complain: ywis, ^o thus possed ^o to and fro
All steerless ^o within a boat am I
Amid the sea, bitwixen ^o windes two,
That in contrary standen everemo. ^o
20 Allas, what is this wonder malady?
For hot of cold, for cold of hot I die.

Endnotes

- Note 1: *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 1, lines 400–420. A translation of Petrarch's Sonnet 132, "S'amor non è." [Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *miserable* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it seems to me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seem* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desire* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complaint* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agrees with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not weary* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *living* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strange* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *can there be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tossed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rudderless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *evermore* [Return to reference](#) °

Balade de bon conseil¹

Flee from the press,^o and dwell with soothfastnesse.

^o
Suffice unto thy thing,^o though it be small.
For hoard hath^o hate, and climbing tikelnesse,^o
Press hath envy, and wele blent^o overal.
Savour no more than thee bihove shall.^o
5 Rule well thyself, that other folk canst rede.^o
And trouthe shall deliver,^o it is no drede.^o

Tempest thee not all crooked to redresse,^{o2}
In trust of her that turneth as a bal.³
Moche wele stands in little busynesse.^{o4}
10 Beware therefore to sporne^o against an awl;^{o 5}
Strive not, as doth the croke^o with the wall.
Daunte^o thyself, that dauntest others' dede.^o
And trouthe shall deliver, it is no drede.

That thee^o is sent, receive in buxumnesse.^o
15 The wrestling for this world axeth^o a fall.
Here is noon home, here nis^o but wilderness.
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beast, out of thy stall!
Know thy country, look up, thank God of all.^o
20 Hold the high way, and let thy ghost^o thee lede.
And trouthe shall deliver, it is no drede.

Envoy

Therefore, thou Vache,⁶ leave^o thyn old
wrecchednesse;^o
Unto the world leave^o now to be thrall;^o

Cry him mercy, that of his high goodnesse
 Made thee of nought,^o and in especial
 Draw unto him, and pray in general
 For thee, and eek for other,^o heavenly mede.⁷
 And trouthe shall deliver, it is no drede.

Endnotes

- Note 1: Taking as his theme Jesus's words to his disciples (in John 8:32), "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," Chaucer plays on the triple meaning that the Middle English word *trouthe* seems to have had for him: the religious truth of Christianity, the moral virtue of fidelity, and the philosophical idea of reality. By maintaining one's faith and one's integrity, one rises superior to the vicissitudes of this world and comes eventually to know reality—which is not, however, of this world.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Do not exhaust yourself to straighten all that's crooked.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Fortune, who turns like a ball in that she is always presenting a different aspect to people.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Peace of mind stands in little anxiety.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Awl; that is, "don't kick against the pricks," or wound yourself by kicking a sharp instrument.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Probably Sir Philip de la Vache, with a pun on the French for "cow."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Reward, with a pun on *meadow*.[Return to reference 7](#)

Notes

- ^o: *crowd* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *truthfulness* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *let your property suffice* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *greed causes* [Return to reference ^o](#)

- °: *unsteadiness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosperity blinds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is good for you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *set (you) free* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doubt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to put to rights*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *activity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kick* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *an awl*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *piece of (breakable) crockery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *control* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the deeds of others*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that which to you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *humility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *asks for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is nothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for everything*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *give up* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slave*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from nothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also for others* [Return to reference](#) °

Chaucer's Words to Adam Scriveyn¹

Adam, scriveyn,^o if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troilus² for to writen newe,^o
Under thy long locks thou most^o have the
scalle^o
But after my making thou write more trewe.³
So oft aday^o I mot^o thy work renewe,^o
5 It to correct and eek to rub and scrape;⁴
And all is through thy negligence and rape.^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: Chaucer had fair copies of longer works made by a professional scribe. This humorous complaint about Adam's sloppy work is written in the verse form of Chaucer's great poem *Troilus and Criseyde*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Troilus and Criseyde*. "Boece": that is, Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Unless you write more accurately what I've composed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Rubbing and scraping are actions necessary to remove ink from parchment.[Return to reference 4](#)

Notes

- °: *scrivener, copyist*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *again*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *may you*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *scabby skin disease*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *often* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *revise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *haste* [Return to reference](#) °

The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse¹

To you, my purse, and to no other wight^o
Complain I, for ye be^o my lady dear.
I am so sorry now that ye be light,
For certes,^o but^o ye make me heavy² cheere,^o
Me were as lief^o be laid upon my bier.
5 For which unto your mercy thus I cry:
Beth^o heavy again, or elles mot^o I die.

Now voucheth-safe^o this day er it be^o night
That I of^o you the blissful sound may hear,
Or see your color like the sonne^o bright
10 That of yellowness hadde never peer.
Ye be my life, ye be myn hertes steer,^o
Queen of comfort and of good company:
Beth heavy again, or elles mot I die.

Now purse, that been to me my life's light
15 And saviour as down in this world here,
Out of this town³ help me through your might,
Since that ye will not been my treasurer—
For I am shaven as nigh as any friar.⁴
But yet I pray unto your courtesy:
20 Beth heavy again, or elles mot I die.

Envoy to Henry IV

O conqueror of Brutes Albyoun,⁵
Which that by line^o and free election
Been very^o king, this song to you I sende,
And ye that mowen^o all our harms amende
25 Have mind upon my supplication!

Endnotes

- Note 1: Clearly written, by implication at least, to Henry IV as the new king of England, after Richard II was deposed in 1399.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “Heavy” here means grave or serious, with a pun on its main sense, weighty (weighed down with money).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Probably Westminster, where Chaucer had rented a house.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Shaved as close as any (tonsured) friar, an expression for being broke.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Britain (Albion) was supposed to have been founded by Brutus, the grandson of the Trojan was Aeneas, ancestor of the Romans.[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *person, being*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *you are*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *expression*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *I’d just as soon*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *be* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *else must*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *agree* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *before it is*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *from*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sun*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rudder*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lineage*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are the true*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *may*[Return to reference °](#)

JOHN GOWER

ca. 1330–1408

Of Gower's life relatively little is known: he was certainly a landowner in Kent, and from about 1377 he seems to have been resident in Southwark, just over the river Thames from the City of London. He had close relations with Chaucer, who sent *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1385) to "moral Gower" (5.1856) for "correction." Indeed, as the co-initiator of a new tradition of English poetry, his reputation throughout the fifteenth century was very nearly on a par with that of Chaucer. He was himself more concerned than Chaucer about his own literary posterity, for he took care that texts of his work would be transmitted in finished, stable form. No contemporary poet matches him for linguistic virtuosity, since Gower wrote in three languages. His main poetic works are as follows: the *Mirour de l'omme* (Mirror of Man), finished 1376–78 and written in Anglo-Norman (the dialect of French spoken in England); the Latin *Vox Clamantis* (Voice of the Crier), written substantially before 1386; and the English *Confessio Amantis* (The Lover's Confession), first published in 1390. The *Mirour*, which was the last major work written in Anglo-Norman in England, was addressed primarily to an upper-class audience capable of reading both French and English, and the Latin *Vox* was clearly directed to a highly educated audience. The first version of the *Confessio* was dedicated to Richard II. By the time of the third recension (1392–93), Richard had been replaced by Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV, as the poem's

dedicatee. Despite these dedications to specific and powerful readers, Gower in fact addressed the *Confessio* to all educated readers, both men and women.

Vox Clamantis refers to the saint whose name Gower bore, John the Baptist, referred to by all four gospels as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23) who will prepare the way for the Lord, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3. Gower thus identifies himself with the prophetic voice of John the Baptist as well as the apocalyptic voice of John the Evangelist in the book of Revelation. In keeping with this posture, the *Mirour* and the *Vox* are examples of estates satire, a genre of satire in which the writer addresses and berates each main occupational grouping of society in turn. (For other examples of estates satire, see Chaucer’s *General Prologue*, [pp. 473–93](#), and the Prologue of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, [pp. 379–82](#).) In the *Vox*, for example, Gower vigorously attacks the peasantry for their part in the English Uprising of 1381.

While Gower wrote as moralist and satirist in the *Mirour* and the *Vox*, he changed tack in the *Confessio Amantis*. To be sure, the poem is structured as a moral discourse: the priestly figure Genius hears the confession of the penitent Amans, as if enacting the procedures of the Church’s sacrament of penance (one part of which was a formal, confidential confession to a priest). In seven of the poem’s eight books, Genius hears Amans’s confession concerning a different Deadly Sin—respectively Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lechery. The very names of penitent and confessor themselves suggest, however, that this is no ordinary Christian confession. For Amans (literally “one who loves”) is heard by a “genial” aspect of the psyche, Genius, who is the priest of Venus. Far from condemning Amans for his hopeless subjection to erotic desire, Genius as often as not encourages Amans in his passion, or so it would seem at first. The eighty or so stories Genius tells by way of “correcting” Amans are drawn not from penitential treatises but rather, on the whole, from secular, classical sources, and often from the poetry of Ovid, the Roman poet most identified with love.

But as the *Confessio* progresses, Genius increasingly registers the social and political disasters that result from single-minded pursuit of erotic desire. While never abandoning his “genial” perspective altogether, and while never wishing to wholly repress sexual passion, Genius finally brings Amans around, to the point where Amans reintegrates with the psyche of which he is ideally a part. He finally regains his full identity as “John Gower.” This recovery of identity involves a very moving self-recognition scene in the poem’s finale, in which an aged Gower recognizes his position simultaneously as a lover, a citizen, and a Christian. The poem is not about only one individual, however: Gower’s sexual governance is linked to political governance of the kingdom. Just as Gower must acknowledge yet control the demands of his body, so too must the king both recognize and govern the desires of his subjects.

Many of Genius’s narratives relate stories whose violence entirely overshadows the often pathetic and always hopeless pursuit by Amans of his lady. The narrative of Tereus and Philomela (“Philomene” in Gower’s narrative), drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (6.424–674), is one such frightening text. It tells a story of unremitting domestic violence, relating the “greediness” of rape to the larger concept of greed, the sin treated by Genius in Book 5 of the *Confessio*. A husband (Tereus) rapes and cuts out the tongue of his sister-in-law (Philomela); his wife (Procne) and her sister take their vengeance by murdering and cooking the rapist’s child (Itys). Philomela’s concern is as much for *publication* of the rape as for vengeance. Because her tongue has been cut out, she relies on weaving as a means of writing, to communicate the terror of her experience. Transformed into a chattering bird at the end of the story, she continues to remind humans of Tereus’s disgrace. When Chaucer had recounted the same story in *The Legend of Good Women* (ca. 1386), he omitted the most hair-raising episodes of the Ovidian source. Gower, by contrast, follows the lineaments of Ovid’s narrative fairly closely and does not turn aside from the transformation of suffering women into terrible avengers, as Procne (here “Progne”) murders and butchers her own child. Nor does he

fail to register the horror of rape, as Philomela feels the inescapable weight of Tereus upon her (lines 96–101).

***From The Lover's Confession*¹**

The Tale of Philomene and Tereus

GENIUS:

Now list,^o my son, and thou shalt hear,
So as it hath befall^o er^o this
In loves cause how that it is
A man to take by^o ravine^o
The preie^o that is feminine.

5

There was a real^o noble king,
And rich of alle worldes thing,
Which of his propre^o inheritance
Athenes had in governance,
And who so^o thinke thereupon,
His name was king Pandion.
Two daughters had he by his wife,
The which he loved as his life;
The firste daughter Progne hight,^o
And the second, as she well might,
Was cleped^o faire Philomene,
To whom fell after muchel tene.^o
The father of his purveance^o
His daughter Progne would advance
And gave her unto marriage
A worthy king of high lignage,^o
A noble knight eke^o of his hand,²
So was he kid^o in every land,
Of Thrace he highte^o Tereus;
The clerk Ovide³ telleth thus.
This Tereus his wife home lad,^o

25

A lusty^o life with her he had;
Til it befell upon a tide,^o
This Progne, as she lay him beside,
Bethought her^o how it mighte be
30 That she her sister mighte see,
And to her lord her will^o she said,
With goodly wordes and him prayed^o
That she to hire^o mighte go:
And if it liked him not^o so,
35 That then he would himselve wend,^o
Or elles^o by some other send,
Which might her deare sister greet
And shape^o how that they mighten meet.
Her lord anon^o to that^o he heard
40 Gave his accord, and thus answered:
"I will," he saide, "for thy sake
The way after thy sister take
Myself, and bring her, if I may."
And she with that, there as he lay,
45 Began him in her armes clip,^o
And kissed him with her softe lip,
And saide, "Sire, grant mercy."^o
And he soon after was ready,
And took his leave for to go;
50 In sorry^o time did he so.
This Tereus goes forth to ship
With him and with his fellowship;
By sea the righte course he nam,^o
Into the country til he cam,^o
55 Where Philomene was dwelling,
And of her sister the tiding^o
He told, and tho^o they weren glade,^o
And muchel^o joy of^o him they made.
The father and the mother both
60 To leave their daughter weren loath,^o
But if^o they weren in presence,^o

And nonetheless at reverence^o
Of^o him that would himself travail,^o
They wolden^o not he sholde fail
65 Of that he prayed,^o and gave hire^o leave:
And she, that wolde not beleve,^o
In all haste made hire^o yare^o
Toward her sister for to fare^o
70 With Tereus and forth she went.
And he, with all his whole intent,^o
When she was from her friendes go,^o
Assoteth of her love so,⁴
His eye might he not withhold,
75 That he ne moste on hire behold;⁵
And with the sight he gan^o desire,
And set his owen^o heart on fire;
And fire, when it to tow^o approacheth,
To him^o anon^o the strength acrocheth,^o
80 Till with his^o heat it be devoured,
The tow ne may not be succored.^o
And so, that tyrant raviner,^o
When that she was in his power,
And he thereto saw time and place,
85 As he that lost hath alle grace,
Forgot he was a wedded man,
And in a rage on her he ran,
Right as a wolf which takes his prey.
And she began to cry and pray,
"O father, o my mother dear,
90 Now help!" But they ne might it hear,
And she was of too little might
Defense against so rude^o a knight
To make, when he was so wood^o
95 That he no reason understood,
But held her under in such wise,^o
That she ne mighte not arise,

But lay oppressed and disesed,^o
As if a goshawk hadde seized
A bird which dorste^o not for fere^o
100 Remue:^o and thus this tyrant there
Beraft^o hire such thing as men sayn
May neveremore be yolde^o again,
And that was the virginity:
Of such ravine^o it was pity.
105 But when she to herselven^o cam,^o
And of her mischief heede nam,^o
And knew how that she was no maid,^o
With woeful hearte thus she said:
"O thou of alle men the worst,
110 Where was there evere man that dorst^o
Do such a deed as thou hast do?^o
That day shall fall, I hope so,
That I shall tell out all my fill,^o
And with my speech I shall fulfill^o
115 The wide world in breadth and length.
That^o thou hast done to me by strength,
If I among the people dwell,
Unto the people I shall it tell;
And if I be withinne wall
120 Of stones closed, than I shall
Unto the stones clepe^o and cry,
And tellen them thy felony;
And if I to the woodes wend,^o
There shall I tellen tale and end,^o
125 And cry it to the birdes out,
That they shall hear it all about.
For I so loud it shall rehearse,^o
That my voice shall the heavens pierce,
That it shall sound in goddes^o ear.
130 Ha, false man, where is thy fear?
O more cruel than any beste,^o
How hast thou holden thy biheste^o

Which thou unto my sister madest?
 O thou, which alle love ungladest,^o
 135 And art example of all untrue,
 Now wolde God^o my sister knew,
 Of thine untruth, how that it stood!"
 And he then as a lion wood^o
 With his unhappy handes strong
 140 Hire^o caughte by the tresses^o long,
 With which he bound there both her armes—
 That was a feeble^o deed of armes—
 And to the ground anon^o hire^o cast,
 And out he clippeth also fast
 145 Her tongue with a pair of shears,^o
 So what with blood and what with tears
 Out of her eye and of her mouth,
 He made her faire face uncouth:^o
 She lay swounende^o unto the death,
 150 There was unnethes^o any breath;
 But yet when he her tongue refte,^o
 A little part thereof belefte,^o
 But she withal no word may soune,^o
 But chitre^o as a bird jargoune.^o
 155 And nonetheless that wood^o hound
 Her body hent^o up from the ground,
 And sent hire there^o as by his will
 She should abide in prison still
 For everemore: but now take heed
 160 What after fell^o of this misdeed.
 When all this mischief was befall,
 This Tereus—that foule him fall!^o—
 Unto his country home he tye;^o
 And when he came his palace nigh,^o
 165 His wife all ready there him kept.^o
 When he hire^o saw, anon he wept,
 And that he dide for deceite,
 For she began to ask him streite,^o

170 "Where is my sister?" And he said
 That she was dead; and Progne abraid,^o
 As she that was a woeful wife,^o
 And stood between her death and life,
 Of that^o she herde such tiding:^o
 But for^o she saw her lord weeping,
 175 She wende^o not but alle truth,
 And hadde well the more ruth.^o
 The pearles weren then forsake
 To hire,⁶ and blacke clothes take;
 As she that was gentil^o and kind,
 180 In worship^o of her sister's mind^o
 She made a rich enterement,^o
 For she found non amendement^o
 To sighen or to sobbe more:
 So was there guile under gore.⁷
 185 Now leave we this king and queen,
 And turn again to Philomene,
 As I began to tellen erst.^o
 When she came into prison first,^o
 It thought^o a kinges daughter strange
 190 To maken so sodein^o a change
 From wealth unto so great a woe;
 And she began to thinke tho,^o
 Though she by mouthe nothing prayed,
 Within her hearte thus she said:
 195 "O thou, almighty Jupiter,
 That high sits and lookest fer,^o
 Thou suffrest many a wrongdoing,
 And yet it is not thy willing.
 To thee there may nothing been hid,
 200 Thou woost^o how it is me betid:^o
 I would I hadde not be born,
 For then I hadde not forlorn^o
 My speech and my virginitee.

205 But, goode lord, all is in thee,^o
When thou thereof wolt do^o vengeance
And shape my deliverance."
And ever among this lady wept,
And thoughte that she nevere kepte^o
210 To been a worldes woman more,
And that she wisheth everemore.
But oft unto her sister deare
Her hearte speaks in this manere,
And said, "Ha, sister, if you knew
215 Of my estate, you wolde rue,^o
I trowe,^o and my deliverance
You wolde shape, and do vengeance
On him that is so false a man:
And nonetheless, so as I can,
220 I will you send some tokening,^o
Whereof you shall have knowleching^o
Of thing, I woot,^o that shall you loath,^o
The which you toucheth^o and me both."
And then within a while als tit^o
225 She wove a cloth of silk all whit^o
With letters and imagery,
In which was all the felony
Which Tereus to her hath do;^o
And lappede^o it together tho^o
And set her signet^o thereupon
230 And sent it unto Progne anon.^o
The messenger which forth it bar,^o
What it amounteth^o is not war;^o
And nonetheless to Progne he goth^o
And prively^o takes her the cloth,
235 And went again right as he cam,^o
The court of him non heede nam.^o
When Progne of Philomene heard,
She wolde know how that it ferde,^o
And openeth that the man hath brought,

240 And woot^o thereby what hath be wrought^o
And what mischief^o there is befall.^o
In swoone then she gan^o down fall,
And eft^o arose and gan to stand,
245 And eft she took the cloth in hand,
Beheld the letters and th'images;
But atte^o last, "Of such outrages,"
She says, "weeping is not the boot,"^o
And swears, if that she live moot,^o
It shall be venged^o otherwise.
250 And with that she gan her advise^o
How first she might unto hire win^o
Her sister, that^o no man within
But only they that were swore,^o
It sholde know, and shoop^o therefore
255 That Tereus nothing it wist;^o
And yet right as herselven^o list,^o
Her sister was delivered soon
Out of prison, and by the moon
To Progne she was brought by night.
260 When each of other had a sight,
In chamber, there^o they were alone,
They maden^o many a pitous moan;^o
But Progne most of sorrow made,
Which saw her sister pale and fade^o
265 And speecheless and dishonoured,
Of that^o she hadde be defloured;^o
And eke^o upon her lord she thought,
Of that he so untrewely wrought^o
And hadde his espousaile^o broke.
270 She made a vow it shall be wroke,^o
And with that word she kneeleth down
Weeping in great devocioun:
Unto Cupid and to Venus
She prayed, and saide thenne thus:
275 "O you, to whom nothing astert^o

Of love may, for every heart
You know, as you that been above,
The god and goddess of love;
You witen^o well that evere yit^o
280 With all my will and all my wit,
Since first you shoopen^o me to wed,
That I lay with my lord abedde,^o
I have be^o true in my degree,^o
285 And evere thoughte for to be,
And nevere love in other place,
But all only the king of Thrace,
Which is my lord and I his wife.
But now alas this woeful strife!
That I him thus againward^o find
290 The most untrue and most unkind^o
That ever in lady armes lay.
And well I woot^o that he ne may
Amend his wrong, it is so great;
For he too little of me leet,^o
295 When he my owne sister took,
And me that am his wife forsook.”
Lo, thus to Venus and Cupide
She prayed, and furthermore she cried
Unto Apollo the highest,
300 And said, “O mighty god of rest,
Thou do vengeance of this debate.
My sister and all her estate^o
Thou woost,^o and how she hath forlore^o
Her maidenhood,^o and I therefore
305 In all the world shall bear a blame
Of that my sister hath a shame,
That Tereus to her I sent:
And well thou woost^o that my intent
Was all for worship^o and for good.
310 O lord that gives the life's food^o
To every wight,^o I pray thee hear

These woeful sisters that been here,
 And let us not to thee been loath;o
 We been thine owne women both."
 315 Thus plaineth Progne and axeth wreche,o
 And though her sister lacke speche,o
 To him that alle thinges wooto
 Her sorrow is not the less hoot:o
 But he that then had heard them two,
 320 Him ought have sorrowed everemoo
 For sorrow which was them between.
 With signes plainetho Philomene,
 And Progne says, "It shall be wreke,o
 That all the world thereof shall speke."
 325 And Progne thoo sicknesse feigneth,o
 Whereof unto her lord she plaineth,o
 And prays she must her chambers keep,o
 And as hire liketho wake and sleep.
 And he hire granteth to be so;
 330 And thus together been they two,
 That would him but a little good.o
 Now harko hereafter how it stood
 Of woeful auntreso that befell:
 These sisters, that been bothe fello
 335 (And that was not on them along,o
 But onliche ono the greate wrong
 Which Tereus them hadde do)
 They shoopeno forto venge them tho.o
 This Tereus by Progne his wife
 340 A soneo hath, which as his life
 He loveth, and Ithis he highte:o
 His mother wisteo well she might
 Do Tereus no more grief
 Than slay this child, which was so lief.o
 345 Thus she, who was, as who sayth,o mad
 Of woe, which hath her overlad,o

Without insight of motherhead^o
Forgot pity and loste dread,
And in her chamber prively^o
350 This child withouten noise or cry
She slew and hewe^o him all to pieces.
And after, with diverse spices
The flesh, when that it was to hewe,^o
She takes, and makes thereof a stew,
355 With which the father at his mete^o
Was served, till he had him eat;
That he ne wiste^o how it stood,
But thus his owene flesh and blood
Himself devoureth against kind,^o
360 As he that was before unkind.^o
And then, er^o that he were arise,
For^o that he sholde been agrise,^o
To shoven him the child was dead,
This Philomene took^o the head
365 Between two dishes, and all wroth^o
Then comen forth the sisters both,
And setten it upon the board.^o
And Progne then began the word,
And said, "O worst of alle wicke,^o
370 Of conscience whom no pricke
May sterve,^o lo, what thou hast do!
Lo, here been now we sisters two;
O raviner,^o lo here thy prey,
With whom so falsliche^o on the way
375 Thou hast thy tyrannye wrought.
Lo, now it is somdel about,^o
And bet^o it shall, for of thy deed
The world shall evere sing and read
In remembrance of thy defame:^o
380 For thou to love hast done such shame,
That it shall nevere be foryete."^o
With that he sterte^o up from the mete,^o

And shoof^o the board^o unto the floor,
And caught a sword anon^o and swore
385 That they should of his handes die,
And they unto the goddes^o cry
Begunne with so loud a steven,^o
That they were heard unto the heaven;
And in a twinkling of an eye
390 The goddes,^o that the mischief seye,^o
Their formes chaungen alle three.
Each one of them in his degree^o
Was turned into birdes kind;^o
Diverseliche^o as men may find,
395 After th'estate that they were in,
Their formes were set atwinne.⁹
And as it telleth in the tale,
The first into a nightingale
Was shape, and that was Philomene,
400 Which in the winter is not seen,
For thenne been the leaves fall
And naked been the bushes all.
For after that she was a brid,^o
Her will^o was evere to been hid,
405 And forto dwell in privy^o place,
Than no man sholde seen her face
For shame which may not be lassed,^o
Of thing that was tofore passed,^o
When that she lost her maidenhead:^o
410 Forever upon her womanhead,^o
Though that the goddes^o would hire^o change,
She thinks, and is the more strange,^o
And holds hire close^o the winters day.
But when the winter goes away,
415 And that Nature the goddess
Will of her owene free^o largess
With herbes and with flowers both

The fieldes and the meadows clothe
And eke^o the woodes and the greves^o
420 Been heled^o all with greene leaves,
So that a bird here hide may,
Between Averil^o and March and May,
She that the winter held hire^o close
For pure shame and not arose,^o
425 When that she sees the bowes thick,
And that there is no bare stick,
But all is hid with leaves green,
To woode comes this Philomene
And makes her firste yeares^o flight;
430 Where, as she singeth day and night,
And in her song all openly
She makes her plaint^o and says, "O why,
O why ne were I yet^o a maid?"^o
For so these olde wise^o said,
435 Which understoode what she meant,
Her notes been of such intent.^o
And eke they said how in her song
She makes great joy and mirth among,
And says, "Ha, now I am a brid,^o
440 Ha, now my face may been hid:
Though I have lost my maidenhead,
Shall no man see my cheekes red."
Thus medleth^o she with joye woe
And with her sorrow mirth also,
445 So that of loves malady
She makes diverse melody,
And says love is a woeful bliss,
A wisdom which can no man wisse,^o
A lusty^o fever, a wounde soft:
450 This note she rehearses oft
To them, who understand her tale.
Now have I of this nightingale,
Which erst^o was cleped^o Philomene,

455 Told all that ever I wolde mean,^o
Both of her form and of her note,
Whereof men may the story note.^o
And of her sister Progne I find,
How she was turned^o out of kind^o
460 Into a swallow swift of wing,
Which eke^o in winter lies swooning,
There as she may nothing be seen:
But when the world is waxen^o green
And comen is the summer-tide,
465 Then flies she forth and ginth^o to chide,
And chittreth out in her langage^o
What falsehood is in marriage,
And telleth in a manner^o speech
Of Tereus' spousebreach.^o
470 She will not in the woodes dwell,
For she would openliche^o tell;
And eke for that^o she was a spouse,
Among the folk she comes to house,
To do^o these wives understand
The falsehood of their husband,
475 That they of them beware also,
For there be many untrue of tho.^o
Thus been the sisters birddes both,
And been toward the men so loath,^o
That they ne will of pure shame^o
480 Unto no mannes hand be tame;
For ever it dwelleth in their mind
Of that they found a man unkind,^o
And that was false Tereus.
If such one be amonges us
485 I noot,^o but his condicioun^o
Men seyn^o in every regioun
Withinne town and eke^o without
Now regneth^o commonly about.
And nonetheless in remembrance

490 I will declare what vengeance
The goddes^o hadden him ordained,
Of that^o the sisters hadden plained:^o
For anon after he was changed
And from his owene kinde stranged,^o
495 A lappewinge made he was,
And thus he hoppeth on the grass,
And on his head there stands upright
A crest in token^o he was a knight;
And yet unto this day men sayth,
500 A lappewinge hath lore^o his faith
And is the bird falsest of all.

Beware my son, er^o thee so fall;
For if thou be of such covine,^o
To get of^o love by ravine^o
505 Thy lust,^o it may thee falle^o thus,
As it befell of Tereus.

AMANS:
My father, goddes forebode!^o
Me were levere^o be fortrode^o
510 With wild horse and be todraw,¹
Er^o I against love and his law
Did anything, or^o loud or still,
Which were not my lady's will.
Men say that every love hath dread;^o
So follows it that I hire^o dread,
515 For I hire love, and who so dreadeth,
To please his love and serve him needeth.^o
Thus may you knowen by this skill^o
That no ravine^o doon I will^o
Against her will by such a way;
520 But while I live, I will obey,
Abiding^o on her courtesy,
If any mercy would her ply.^o
Forthy,^o my father, as of this

525 I woot^o not I have done amiss:
But furthermore I you beseech,
Some other point that you me teach
And axeth^o forth, if there be ought,^o
That I may be the better taught.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is drawn from *The English Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macaulay, for the Early English Text Society (1900–1901). Here it has been subject to significant modernization: spelling within the text has been modernized wherever such a change does not interfere with sense or meter.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: With respect to himself (in addition to his high lineage).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Roman poet (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.); Gower's source is his *Metamorphoses* 4.424–674.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Became so besotted with love for her.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Could not keep from looking at her.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, she gave up jewelry.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, deceit under cover. "Gore" is a kind of cloak; the expression is probably proverbial.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In this way, Progne laments and asks for vengeance.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, their forms as birds differed from one another as they had differed in their human estate or condition.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Drawn; to be dragged as a form of punishment.[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *listen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seize by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prey*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *royal*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *own*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whoever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forethought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lineage*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *known*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *led*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *agreeable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certain time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *considered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *asked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if that did not please him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *else*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrange*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *what*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *embrace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thank you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrowful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *came*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *glad*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *great* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *were hesitant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *attendance*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *with due respect*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *take the trouble*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wished*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *what he asked* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *her*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *be left*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *herself* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ready*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *travel*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mind*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *departed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *began to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *own*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flax (flammable material)*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it (fire)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *at once* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gathers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *its*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *preserved*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ravenger*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rough*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mad*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in such a way*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *distressed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dared* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fear*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *escape*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *deprived*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *restored*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *rape*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *came*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took heed of her misfortune*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virgin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tell all*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that which*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the whole story*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repeat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a god's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beast*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who makes all love unhappy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I wish by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cowardly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shears*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distorted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fainting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scarcely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *removed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was left*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *utter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *twitter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chatters*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seized*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *where*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *befell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may evil befall him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *traveled*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *near*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *awaited*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *directly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *started violently*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woman*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *news*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *memory*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *funeral*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at first*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seemed to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sudden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *far*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened to me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *depends on you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wish to do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lament*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *token*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knowledge*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be loathsome to you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concerns* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *white* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrapped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wax seal* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *means* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aware* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *came* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took no notice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fared* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been done* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misfortune* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *had happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *began* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *after* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remedy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *might* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consider* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *get* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sworn (to silence)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arranged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desired* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lament* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deflowered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wickedly done* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wedding vow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escape* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arranged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in bed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *role* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on the contrary* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unnatural and cruel* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prized* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virginity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *honor* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sustenance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be unfavored* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speech* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forever more* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laments* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenged* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *then* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pretends* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *complains* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stay in her bedroom* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it pleases her* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *(would do him harm)* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hear* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chances* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fiercely cunning* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *not their fault* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *on account of* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *arranged* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *then* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *son* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *was named* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *dear* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as they say* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *overcome* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *motherhood* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secretly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cut* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *all cut up* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *did not know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *contrary to nature* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cruel and unnatural* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *before* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *so* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *horrified* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *placed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *angry* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *table* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evil men* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disturb* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ravenger* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *falsely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *somewhat repaid*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *pushed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *table*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *voice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gods* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misfortune* *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *condition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a bird species*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *bird*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hidden*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *before done*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *gods* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reclusive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *keeps herself concealed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *generous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *groves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *covered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *April*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not come out*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *annual*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *complaint*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *still* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *virgin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wise people*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meaning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bird*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mixes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *healthy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *earlier* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *named*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *remember*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *transformed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her nature*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grown*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *unnatural and cruel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do not know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *type*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *see*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dwells*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on account of what* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lamented*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *estranged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *signifying* [Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *treachery* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rape* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desire* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *befall* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forbid* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I would rather* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trodden* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *either* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anxiety* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *argument* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rape* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will I commit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *waiting* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *persuade* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accordingly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ask* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anything* [Return to reference](#) °

THOMAS HOCCKLEVE

ca. 1367–1426

“Debate is now noon bitwix me and my wit,” declares the first-person narrator, one “Thomas,” in line 247 of Thomas Hocckleve’s poem *My Complaint* (1419–20), telling his readers that he is now recovered from mental instability. The text as a whole, however, tells a much more painful story: Hocckleve’s problem is less mental instability and more the fact that his friends think him unstable. Thomas acknowledges that he had a nervous breakdown of sorts five years ago, but now, feeling fully recovered, he remains tortured by his friends’ lack of trust. He’s so distressed by their distrust, in fact, that it is driving him insane.

The real Thomas Hocckleve corresponds closely to the “Thomas” as represented in Hocckleve’s poetry. Hocckleve was a civil servant, working as a skilled clerk in the office of the Privy Seal, which copied and produced documents for the English government. In addition to his bureaucratic tasks, he produced poetic texts of a high order, notably the *Regement of Princes* (1410–13) and the so-called *Series* (ca. 1419–21), a compilation of which *My Complaint* is the first part. He also wrote occasional poems, both subtle petitionary texts (asking for payment) and poetry voicing official policy. He seems to have experienced a period of mental instability in 1414. The detailed evidence for this inference derives only from the *Series*, although it might be relevant that Hocckleve was not paid in fall of 1414.

Hoccleve represents himself in sometimes amusingly, more often painfully, vulnerable ways. He is English poetry's first alienated urban bureaucrat, intellectual, and poet, alienated from his work (for which he is underpaid and paid late, if paid at all) and alienated from his patrons, readers, and friends.



Patronage. Thomas Hoccleve, *Regement of Princes*, 1412. Hoccleve presents his poem to Prince Henry. The author is on his knees to his patron, even if the book he presents is less subservient than the image might suggest.

Being thought less than fully sane is a tricky challenge for both a human being and an author. Staying away from company so as to avoid suspicion merely provokes further suspicion: Thomas's friends will, he reasonably surmises, think him "fallen in again" (line 182). Out in public he overhears the voices of those commenting on his bizarre physical mannerisms; but back home, he retreats to his mirror and searches for signs of instability that he might rectify. In public or alone with his mirror image, Thomas is bounced back and forth by the "peoples imagination" (line 380), what others think or say about him, his public image, subject as it is to the "social media" conditions of early fifteenth-century London. Maybe reading books of consolation is the answer, books that anchor identity in God, not in society. So ends *My Complaint*, but, interestingly, Thomas never gets to the end of that book, and besides, his apparent acceptance of its advice is belied by the complex time sequence of *My Complaint*: he claims to have been pacified by the spiritual book *before* the time of bursting out with the complaint. Only Hoccleve's own text might do the trick here, by reintegrating him with his readers, unless of course they examine his work diagnostically, looking for signs in his poetry of uncured madness.

My Complaint is a searing expression of, and attempted self-therapy for, melancholia. This is the "thoughtful maladye" (line 21), or what we might call depression. Hoccleve represents the author in a state of paranoid self-scrutiny, his own voice invaded by the distrustful remarks of his acquaintances and readers. The painful predicament of someone who has fallen out of favor and become an outcast within a claustrophobic social scene points forward to early modern court satire. It might also point us to that other striking misfit in late medieval English writing, Hoccleve's contemporary Margery Kempe, whose distinctiveness is either saintly or sad.

My Complaint¹

After that harvest^o inned^o had his sheaves,
And that the brown season of Michelmesse²
Was come, and gan^o the trees rob of her^o leaves,
That green had been and in lusty^o fresshnesse,
And hem into color of yelownesse
5 Had dyed^o and down throwen underfoote,
That chaunge sank into myn herte^o roote.

For freshly brought it to my remembrance
That stableness in this worlde is ther none.
Ther is nothing but change and variance.^o
10 How wealthy a man be or wel begun,^o
Endure it shall not. He shall it forgoon.^o
Death underfoot shall him thruste adown.^o
That is every wightes^o conclusion,

Which for to weyve^o is in no mannes might,
15 How^o rich he be, strong, lusty,^o fresh and gay.
And in the end of November, upon a night,
Sighinge^o sore, as I in my bed lay,
For this and other thoughtes which many a day,
Before I took, sleep cam noon in myn eye,
20 So vexed me the thoughtful maladye.^o

I saw well, sithen^o I with sickness last
Was scourged, cloudy hath been the favor
That shone on me full bright^o in times past.
The sun abated,^o and the darke^o shower
25 Hilded^o down right on me, and in langor^o
Me made swim, so that my spirit
To live no lust^o had, ne no delight.

30 The grief about myn heart so sore swal^o
And bolned^o ever to and to^o so sore
That nedes^o oute^o I muste therewithal.^o
I thought I nolde^o kepe it close^o no more,
Ne let it in me for to elde^o and hore,^o
And for to preve^o I cam^o of a woman,
35 I burst out on the morrow^o and thus began.

Here endeth my prologue and foloweth my compleint.

Almighty God, as liketh^o his goodnesse,
Visiteth^o folk alday,^o as men may see,
With loss of good and bodily sicknesse,
And among other,^o he forgot not me.
40 Witness upon the wild infirmity
Whiche that I had, as many a man well knew,
And which me out of myself cast and threw.

It was so knowen to the peple and couthe^o
That counseil^o was it noon, ne not be might.
45 How it with me stood was in every mannes mouthe,
And that ful sore^o my friends affright.^o
They for myn health pilgrimages hight,^o
And sought hem, some on horse and some on foot,
God yeld it hem,^o to gete me my boot.^o

50 But although the substance of my memory
Went to play as for a certain space,^o
Yet^o the lord of virtue, the king of glory,
Of his high might and his benigne grace,
Made it for to return into the place
55 Whence it came,^o whiche at Alle Hallowmess³
Was five year,^o neither more ne less.

And ever sithen,^o thanked be God our Lord

Of^o his good and gracious reconciliation,
My wit and I have been of such accord^o
As we were or^o the alteration
60 Of it was, but by my salvation,
Sith^o that time have I been sore set on fire
And lived in great torment and martire.^o

For though that my wit were home come again,
Men would it not so understand or take.^o
65 With me to deal hadden they disdain.^o
A riotous^o person I was and forsake.^o
Min olde frendship was al overshake.^o
No wight^o with me list make daliance.^o
70 The world me made a strange countinace,^o

Which that myn herte sore gan to torment,
For ofte whan I in Westminster Halle,
And eke^o in London, among the press^o went,
I saw the cheer abaten^o and apalle^o
Of hem^o that weren wont^o me for to call
75 To company.^o Her^o head they cast awry,^o
Whan I hem met, as^o they not me sy.^o

As said is in the Psalter might I sey,
'They that me saw, fledden away from me.'⁴
Forgotten I was all out of mind away,
80 As he that dead was from^o heart's charity.^o
To a lost vessel likened might I be,
For many a wight^o aboute me dwelling^o
Heard I me blame and put in dispraising.^o

Thus spake many one and said by^o me:
85 'Although from him his sickness savage^o
Withdrawn and passed as for a time be,
Resort^o it will, namely^o in such age
As he is of,' and thanne my visage^o

90 Began to glow^o for the woe and fear.
 Tho^o wordes, hem unwar,^o came to myn ear.

 'Whan passing^o heat is,' quod they, 'trusteth^o this,
 Assail him will again that malady.'
 And yet, parde,^o they token hem amiss.^o
 None effect at all took her prophecy.^o
 95 Many summers been^o passed sithen^o remedy
 Of that God of his grace^o me purveyed.^o
 Thanked be God, it shoop^o not as they seyde.

 What^o falle shal,^o what men so deem^o or guess,
 To him that woot^o every hertes secree,^o
 100 Reserved is. It is a lewednesse^o
 Men wiser hem pretende^o than they be,
 And no wight^o knoweth, be it he or she,
 Whom, how, ne when God will him visite.^o
 It happeth often when men wene^o it lite.^o
 105
 Sometime I wende^o as lite^o as any man
 For to han fall^o into that wildenesse,
 But God, whan him liste,^o may, will and can
 Health withdraw and send a wight^o sicknesse.
 110 Though man be wel this day, no sikernes^o
 To him bihight^o is that it shall endure.
 God hurt now can, and nowe heal and cure.

 He suffreth^o long but at the last he smit.^o
 Whan that a man is in prosperity,
 To dread a fall coming it is a wit.^o
 115 Whoso^o that taketh heed oft may see
 This worldes change and mutability
 In sundry wise,^o how nedeth not expresse.^o
 To my matter straight^o will I me dresse.^o

 120 Men seiden I loked as^o a wilde steer,^o

And so my look about I gan to throw.°
Myn head to high, another said, I beer.°
'Full buckissh° is his brain, well may I trow.'°
And said the third, 'And apt is° in the row°
To sit of hem that a reasonless reed°
125 Can give: no sadness° is in his heed.'

Changed had I my pace,° some seiden eke,°
For here and there forth stirte° I as a roe,°
None abode,° none arrest,° but al brainseke.°
Another spake and of° me said also,
130 My feet weren ay waving° to and fro,
When that I stonde° should and with men talke,
And that myn eyen° soughten° every halke.°

I leide an ear ay to° as I by went
And herde al, and thus in myn heart I caste:°
135 'Of long abidinge here I may me repent.
Lest that of hastiness I at the laste
Answer amiss, best is hence hie faste,°
For if I in this press° amiss me gye,°
To harm wole it me turn and to folie.'°
140

And this I deemed° well and knew well eke,°
Whatso° that ever I should answer or seie,°
They wolden not han holde° it worth a leke.°
Forwhy,° as° I had lost my tounge keie,°
Kepte I me close,° and trussed me my weie,°
145 Dropping° and heavy and all woe bistad.°
Small cause had I, methoughte, to be glad.

My spirits laboureden ever ful busily
To painte countenance,° cheer and look,°
For° that men spake of me so wondrously,
150 And for the very shame and fear I qwook.°
Though° myn herte had be dippid° in the brook

It wet and moist was ynow^o of my swoot,^o
Which was now frosty cold, nowe fiery hoot.^o

155 And in my chamber at home whan that I was
Myself alone I in this wise^o wrought.^o
I straight^o unto my mirror and my glass,^o
To look how that me of my chere thought,^o
If any^o other^o were it than it ought,
For fain^o would I, if it not had been right,
160 Amended^o it to my cunning^o and might

Many a saut^o made I to this mirror,
Thinking, 'If that I look in this manere
Amonge folk as I now do, noon^o error
Of suspect^o look may in my face appere.
165 This countenance,^o I am sure, and this chere,^o
If I it forth^o use, is nothing^o reprevable^o
To hem that han conceites^o resonable.'

And therwithal^o I thoughte thus anoon:^o
'Men in her^o owne cas^o been blind alday,^o
170 As I have herde seie many a day agoon,^o
And in that same plight^o I stonde may.
How shall I do? Which is the beste way
My troubled spirit for to bring in rest?
If I wiste^o how, fain^o would I do the best.'
175

Sithen^o I recovered was, have I full oft
Cause had of anger and impacience,
Where I borne have it easily^o and soft,^o
Suffring^o wrong be done to me, and offence,
And not answered again,^o but kept silence,
180 Lest that men of me deem^o would, and sein,
'See how this man is fallen in^o again.'

As that I ones^o from Westminster⁵ cam,

Vexed full grievously with thoughtful hete,
Thus thought I, 'A greet fool I am,
185 This pavement adaies thus to bete,
And in and out laboure fast and swete,
Wondringe and heavinesse to purchase,
Sithen I stand out of all favor and grace.'

And than thought I on that other side,
190 'If that I not be seen among the press,
Men deme will that I myn hede hide,
And am worse than I am, it is no lees.
O Lorde, so my spirit was restelee.
I soughte reste and I not it fonde,
195 But ay was trouble ready at myn honde.

I may not let a man to imagine
Far above the moon, if that him liste.
Thereby the soth he may not determine,
But by the preef been thinges known and wiste.
200 Many a doom is wrapped in the miste.
Man by his dedes and not by his lookes
Shall knowen be. As it is written in bookes,

By taste of fruit men may wel wite and knowe
What that it is. Other preef is ther none.
205 Every man woote well that, as that I trowe.
Right so, they that deemen my wit is gone,
As yet this day there deemeth many one
I am not well, may, as I by hem go,
Taste and assay if it be so or no.
210

Uppon a look is harde men hem to ground
What a man is. Therby the soth is hid.
Whether his wittes sick been or sound,
By countenance is it not wist ne kid.
215 Though a man hard have once been bitid,

God shield^o it should on him continue alway.
By communinge^o is the best assay.^o

220 I mene, to commune^o of thinges mene,^o
For I am but right lewed,^o doubtless,
And ignorant. My cunning^o is ful lene.^o
Yet homely reason^o know I neverethless.
Not hope^o I founden be^o so reasonless^o
As men deemen.^o Marie,^o Crist forbede!^o
I can^o no more. Preve^o may the dede.^o

225 If a man once falle in drunkenesse,
Shall he continue therein everemo^o?
Nay, though a man do in drinking excesse^o
So ferforth^o that not speak he ne can, ne go,
And his wits well nigh been refte^o him fro,
230 And buried in the cup; he afterward
Cometh to himself again, else were it^o hard.

Right so, though that my wit were a pilgrim,
And wente fer^o from home, he cam^o again.
God me devoided^o of the grievous venim
That had infected and wilded^o my brain.
235 See how the courteous leche^o most sovereign
Unto the sike yeveth^o medicine
In need, and him releveth of his grievous pine.^o

Now let this pass. God woot,^o many a man
Semeth ful wise by countenance^o and chere^o
240 Which, and^o he tasted^o were what he can,^o
Men mighten liken^o him to a fooles pere,^o
And some man looketh in foltisshe manere^o
As to the outward doom^o and jugement,
That, at the prefe,^o discreet^o is and prudent.
245

But algates,^o how so^o be my countenance,

Debate^o is now noon bitwix^o me and my wit,
 Although that there were a disseverance,^o
 As for a time, bitwixe me and it.
 The greater harme is myn, that never yit^o
 250 Was I wel lettred,^o prudent and discreet.^o
 Ther never stood yet wise man on my feet.

The soth^o is this, suche conceit^o as I had
 And understanding, al^o were it but^o small,
 Before that my wittes weren unsad,^o
 255 Thanked be our Lorde Jhesu Christ of all,^o
 Such have I now, but blow^o is nigh overall^o
 The reverse, wherethrough^o much is my mourning,
 Which causeth me thus sigh in complaining.

Sithen^o my good fortune hath changed hir cheer,^o
 260 High tyme is me^o to creep into my grave.
 To live joylees,^o what do I here?
 I in myn herte can no gladness have.
 I may but small say but if^o men deem^o I rave.
 Sithen^o other thing than woe may I noon gripe,^o
 265 Unto^o my sepulcher am I now ripe.^o

My wele,^o adieu, farewell, my good fortune.
 Oute of youre tables me planed^o han ye.
 Sithen welnigh any wight^o for to commune^o
 With me loathe is, farewell prosperity.
 270 I am no longer of your livery.
 Ye have me put out of your retenance.^o
 Adieu, my good aventure^o and good chaunce.^o

And aswith^o after, thus bithought I me:^o
 275 'If that I in this wise me despair,
 It is purchase of more adversity.
 What nedeth it^o my feeble wit appair,^o
 Sith^o God hath made myn healthe home repair,^o

280 Blessed be he. And what^o men deem^o and speke,
Suffer^o it think I and me not on me wreke.^o

But somdel^o had I rejoycing amonge,^o
And a gladness also in my spirite,
That though the people took hem^o miss^o and
 wonge,^o
Me deeming^o of my sicknesse not quite,^o
285 Yet for they complained^o the heavy plite^o
That they had seen me in with tenderness
Of hertes cherte,^o my grief was the less.

In hem putte I no default^o but oon.^o
That I was whole, they not ne deme^o coude,^o
290 And day by day they saw me by hem goon^o
In heat and cold, and neither still or lowde^o
Knew they me do suspectly.^o A derke^o clowde
Hir^o sight obscured withinne and withoute,
And for all that were^o ay^o in such a doute.^o

295 Axed^o han they full oft esith,^o and freined^o
Of my fellowes of the Privy Seel,⁶
And prayed hem to telle hem with heart unfained,^o
How it stood with me, whether evil or well.
And they the sothe^o tolde hem every del,^o
300 But they helden her^o wordes not but lees.^o
They mighten as well have holden her peace.^o

This troublly^o life hath all too long endured.
Not have I wist^o how in my skin to tourne.
But now myself to myself have ensured^o
305 For no such wondring^o after this to mourne.^o
As long as my life shall in me sojourne^o
Of such imagining I not ne recche.^o
Let hem deem^o as hem list^o and speak
 and drecche.^o

This other day a lamentacioun
Of a wooful man in a book^z I sy,^o
310 To whom wordes of consolacioun
Reason yaf^o speking effectuelly,^o
And well eased myn herte was thereby,^o
For when I had a while in the book read,
315 With the spech of Reason was I well fed.^o

The heavy^o man woeful and anguishous^o
Complained in this wise, and thus said he:
'My life is unto me full encombrous,^o
For whither or unto what place I flee,
My wickednesses evere followen me,
320 As men may see the shadow a body sue,^o
And in no manner I may hem eschewe.^o

'Vexation of spirit and torment
Lack I right none. I have of hem plenty.
Wonderly^o bitter is my taste and scent.^o
325 Woe^o be the time of my nativity.
Unhappy man, that ever should I be.
O death, thy stroke a salve^o is of sweetnesse
To hem that liven in such wrecchednesse.

'Greater plesance were it me^o to die,
330 By many fold^o than for to live so.
Sorrows so many in me multiplie
That my life is to me a very foe.
Comforted may I not be of my woe.
Of my distresse see none end I can.
335 No force^o how soon I stinte^o to be a man.'

Thanne spake Reason, 'What meneth all this fare?^o
Though wealth be not friendly to thee, yit^o
Out of thine herte voide^o woe and care.'

340 'By what skill,^o how, and by what reed^o and wit,^o
Said this woeful man, 'might I doon^o it?'
'Wrestle,' quod Resoun, 'ayein^o heavynesse^o
Of the worlde, troubles, suffringe and duresse.^o

'Biholde how many a man suffreth disease,
As great as thou and alaway^o grettere,
345 And though it hem^o pinche sharply and sieze,
Yet patiently they it suffer and bere.^o
Think hereon and the less it shall thee dere.^o
Such suffrance is of mannes guilt cleansing,^o
And hem enableth to^o joy everlasting.

350 'Woe, heaviness and tribulation
Common aren^o to men all, and profitable.
Though grievous be mannes temptation,
It sleeth^o man not. To hem that^o ben suffrable^o
And to whom Goddes stroke is acceptable
355 Purveyed^o joy is, for God woundeth tho^o
That he ordeined hath to bliss to go.

'Gold purged^o is, thou seest, in the furneis,^o
For the finer and cleaner^o it shall be.
Of thy disease the weighte and the peis^o
360 Bear lightly,^o for God, to prove^o thee,
Scourged thee hath with sharpe adversite.
Not grouche^o and say, "Why sustain I this?"
For if thou do, thou thee takest amiss.^o

365 'But thus thou shouldest thinke in thine herte,
And say, "To thee, lord God, I have aguilte^o
So sore^o I moot^o for myn offences smerte,^o
As I am worthy.^o O Lorde I am spilte,^o
But^o thou to me thy mercy grante wilte.
I am ful sure thou mayst it not deny.
370 Lord, I me repent, and I thee mercy cry.' "^o

Longer I thought read have^o in this book,
But so it shope^o that I ne might naught.^o
He that it oughte^o again it to him took,
Me of his haste unaware.^o Yet have I caught^o
375 Some of the doctrine by Reason taught
To the man, as above have I said.
Well thereof^o I holde me full well apaid,^o

For evere sithen^o set have I the less
By the peoples imagination,
380 Talkinge this and that of my sickness
Which came of^o Goddes visitation.
Might I have be^o found in probation^o
Not grouching^o but han take it in souffrance,^o
Wholesome and wise had be^o my
385 governance.^o

Farewell my sorrow, I cast it to the cock.
With patience I henceforth think unpick^o
Of such thoughtful disease^o and woe the lock,
And let hem^o out that han me made to sike.^o
Hereafter our Lorde God may, if him like,^o
390 Make all myn old affeccoun^o resort,^o
And in hope of that will I me comfort.

Thorough^o Godes just doom^o and his jugement
And for my best,^o now I take and deeme,^o
395 Gave that good lorde me my punishment.
In wealth I took of him none heed or yeme,^o
Him for to please and him honor and queme,^o
And he me gave a bone on for to gnawe,
Me to correct and of him to have awe.

He gave wit and he took it away
400 When that he saw that I it misdispente,^o

And gave again when it was to his pay^o
He granted me my guiltes to repente,
And hence forward to sette myn entente^o
Unto his deity to do plesaunce,^o
405 And to amend my sinful governaunce.^o

Laud^o and honor and thank unto thee be,
Lord God, that salve art to all heavinesse.^o
Thank of^o my wealth and myn adversity.
Thank of myn elde^o and of my sicknesse.^o
410 And thank be to thine infinite goodnesse
And thy giftes and benefices^o alle,
And unto thy mercy and grace I calle.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is drawn from Thomas Hoccleve, "*My compleinte*" and *Other Poems*, edited by Roger Ellis (2001). Obsolete letter forms have been modernized. Spelling has also been modernized so as to facilitate sense, wherever this does not interfere with meter or rhyme. Ellis's glosses have been preserved, with some modification. Readers should aim to produce an iambic pentameter for each line. Some lines demand variation on that default pattern.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Michaelmas falls on September 29. Note the melancholy inversion of the opening of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (see p. 473).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: All Hallowmas, or All Saints Day, falls on November 1.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: From Psalm 31; a psalter is a book of psalms and perhaps other devotional material.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Westminster, a city separate from London proper; Hoccleve's workplace as a royal bureaucrat.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Hoccleve was a clerk in the Office of the Privy Seal, one of three great bureaucratic offices, responsible for the production and issuing of many kinds of official documents. Hoccleve himself produced a set, or "Formulary," of almost 900 model Privy Seal documents.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The book can be identified as the *Synonyma* of Isidore of Seville (d. 636).[Return to reference 7](#)

Notes

- °: *autumn* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *brought in* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *proceeded* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *their* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *died* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *heart's* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *alteration* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prosperous* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lose* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thrust down* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *person's* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *avoid* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *however* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *vigorous* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sighing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *melancholia* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *very brightly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *diminished* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dark* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *poured* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *depression* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasure* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *swelled* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *swelled* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more and more* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *necessarily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burst out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *age* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grow gray* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prove* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *was born* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *next day* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *visits* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *continually* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *others* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *familiar* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frightened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promised* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reward them for it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *health* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for a time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went out* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *five years ago* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as well agreed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accept* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scorn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dissolute* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *abandoned*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shaken off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleased to converse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the face of a stranger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowd*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faces grow dejected* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to join them* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *their* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aside*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *far from* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *love*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in my vicinity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *and censure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wild*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *return* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *especially*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *face*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *without their knowledge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *extreme* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by heaven* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *were wrong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *their prophecy was wrong*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *by his grace* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *provided with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shall happen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *an ignorance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to pretend themselves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *visit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expect* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not at all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *little* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to have fallen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *promised* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *endures* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *smites* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mark of wisdom* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whoever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *different ways* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to declare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *address myself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *looked like* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ox* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cast* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *very like a buck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(he) is fit* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: (*company*)[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *senseless piece of advice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soundness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *step* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moreover*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *started* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *roebuck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *resting* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stopping* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brainsick*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *concerning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moving*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stand (still)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sought* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *corner (of room)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gave an ear to this constantly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reflected*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to depart quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *crowd* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *misbehave myself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *and (make me) a laughingstock*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *say*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *considered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leek*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *therefore* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tongue's key*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *private* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took myself off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drooping* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *woebegone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *face*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *because*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shook*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been plunged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enough* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with my sweat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot as fire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *went directly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mirror*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *my expression seemed to me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in any way* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *different*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *improved* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *according to my skill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leap*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suspicious*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abroad* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *objectionable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understanding*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thereupon* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *their* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *situations* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *continually*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before this*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *danger*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *calmly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gently*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enduring*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *back*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(to his sickness)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burning thought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *daily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beat (upon)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *everywhere* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uncertainty* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throng*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *head*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prevent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from imagining*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proof* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understood*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hidden (as) in*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deeds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understand*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proof*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *many a one* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *test* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *it is* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *for men to determine* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *truth* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wits* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *known* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *made public* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *has once experienced hardship* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forbid* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *conversation* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *test* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *converse* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ordinary* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *uneducated* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knowledge* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *very slight* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ordinary reasoning* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *think* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to be found* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *foolish* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *judge* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *St. Mary* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forbid* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prove this* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *deed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evermore* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *drink to excess* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *far* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *are almost all taken* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *otherwise it would be* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *far* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *returned* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *emptied* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *maddened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doctor*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sick man gives*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *appearance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tested* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *compare* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *like a fool*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *external estimation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *when tested* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rational*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *all the same* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *however*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disagreement* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *separation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *educated* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deliberative*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thoughts*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *only*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unstable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for all*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blown* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearly everywhere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *through which*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *look*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for me*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *joyless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grasp*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wealth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *removed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *talk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *retinue*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fortune* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *luck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reflected*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *need is there* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to weaken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *return*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to endure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to avenge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *somewhat* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between whiles*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amiss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrongly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judging* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *freed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *regretted* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plight*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *love*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found no fault* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: judge [Return to reference](#) °
- °: could [Return to reference](#) °
- °: go [Return to reference](#) °
- °: silent or speaking [Return to reference](#) °
- °: to act suspiciously [Return to reference](#) °
- °: dark [Return to reference](#) °
- °: their [Return to reference](#) °
- °: they were [Return to reference](#) °
- °: always [Return to reference](#) °
- °: uncertainty [Return to reference](#) °
- °: asked [Return to reference](#) °
- °: often [Return to reference](#) °
- °: inquired [Return to reference](#) °
- °: sincere [Return to reference](#) °
- °: truth [Return to reference](#) °
- °: completely [Return to reference](#) °
- °: reckoned their [Return to reference](#) °
- °: nothing but lies [Return to reference](#) °
- °: kept their peace [Return to reference](#) °
- °: troublesome [Return to reference](#) °
- °: known [Return to reference](#) °
- °: guaranteed [Return to reference](#) °
- °: puzzlement [Return to reference](#) °
- °: to be fretful [Return to reference](#) °
- °: remain [Return to reference](#) °
- °: care [Return to reference](#) °
- °: judge [Return to reference](#) °
- °: please [Return to reference](#) °
- °: speculate [Return to reference](#) °
- °: saw [Return to reference](#) °
- °: gave [Return to reference](#) °
- °: to good effect [Return to reference](#) °
- °: by it [Return to reference](#) °
- °: nourished [Return to reference](#) °
- °: depressed [Return to reference](#) °
- °: anguished [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *burdensome*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *follow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avoid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amazingly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *smell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accursed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ointment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure would it be for me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many times over*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *matter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *behavior*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cast*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strategem* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counsel* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *do*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sadnesses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hardships*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *continually*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *them*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bear*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purification*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enables them to attain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *kills* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those who* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are patient*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordained* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purified*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *furnace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purer*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *burden* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easily* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *act wrongly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *done wrong* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grievously* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as I deserve* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroyed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beg mercy of you* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to have read* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *happened* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *owned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unaware* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *taken* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with it* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *satisfied* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *from* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *when tested* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complaining* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *patience* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would have been* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *self-control* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to undo* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *melancholia* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *them (my thoughts)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sigh* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *please* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *feeling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *return* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *through* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sentence* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *my greatest profit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reckon* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attention* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gratify* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *used it amiss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *profit* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intention* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to please his godhead* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way of life* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *praise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sadness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thanks for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *age* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sickness* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *benefits* [Return to reference](#) °

MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRICS

Medieval England was home to a distinctive practice of lyric poetry, quite different from the traditions developed in continental Europe. In southern France, elegantly produced *chansonniers*, or “songbooks,” anthologized the lyric poetry and music by troubadors and trouvères, whose names and, sometimes, biographies were attached to their compositions. It was only late in the fourteenth century that English writers began to develop the kind of aristocratic, formal, and learned lyric that had also been cultivated by the Minnesänger in Germany (German *Minne* corresponds to French *fine amour*—that is, refined or aristocratic love) and by the Italian poets writing in what Dante characterized as the *dolce stil nuovo* (sweet new style). By contrast, Middle English lyrics were often haphazardly copied, sometimes in the midst of other texts such as legal documents and student notes. The overwhelming majority of English lyrics are anonymous. These short, seemingly undistinguished verses testify to a conception among English audiences of lyric as a malleable poetic commons.

In the later fourteenth century, Chaucer, under the influence of French poets, began to write lovers’ complaints, homiletic poetry, and verse letters in the form of ballades, roundels, and other highly stylized lyric types (see [pp. 573–76](#)). In the fifteenth century, John Lydgate, Thomas Hoccleve, and others following Chaucer wrote lyrics of this sort, which were praised for embellishing the English language. These, along with Chaucer’s, were collected in manuscript anthologies that were produced commercially for well-to-do buyers.

Still, Chaucer and those who wrote after him remained familiar with and influenced by the tradition of common, anonymous verses and songs, almost all of which have perished. With one exception, the Middle English lyrics included in this section are the work of anonymous poets and are difficult to date with any precision. Some of these survive in only a single manuscript. The topics and language in these poems are highly conventional, yet the lyrics often seem remarkably fresh and spontaneous. Many are marked by strong accentual rhythms with a good deal of alliteration. Their pleasure comes not from originality or depictions of lived experience but from variations upon expected themes and images. Some were undoubtedly set to music, and in a few cases the music has survived. Perhaps the earliest of those printed here, "The Cuckoo Song," is a canon or round in which the voices follow one another and join together echoing the joyous cry, "Cuckou." The rooster and hen in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* sing "My Lief Is Faren in Londe" in "sweet accord" (line 59). "I Am of Ireland" was undoubtedly accompanied by dancing as well as music.

The joyous return of spring—celebrated in the *reverdie*, or spring song (literally, "regreening")—is the subject of many lyrics. In love lyrics the mating of birds and animals in wild nature often contrasts with the melancholy of unrequited or forsaken human lovers. These lovers are usually male. We know that some women wrote troubador and court poetry, but we do not know whether women composed popular lyrics; women certainly sang popular songs, just as they are portrayed doing in narrative poetry.

The Cuckoo Song

Sumer is ycomen in,
Loude sing cuckou!
Groweth seed and bloweth meed¹
And springth the wode_o now.
Sing cuckou!

5

Ewe bleteth after lamb,
Loweth after calve cow,
Bulloc sterteth,_o bucke verteth,_o
Merye sing cuckou!

10

Cuckou, cuckou,
Wel singest thou cuckou:
Ne swik_o thou never now!

Endnotes

- Note 1: The meadow blossoms. [Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *wood* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *leaps* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *farts* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cease* [Return to reference °](#)

Foweles in the Frith

Foweles^o in the frith,^o
The fisses^o in the flod,^o
And I mon^o waxe wod:^o
Mulch sorw^o I walke with
For beste¹ of bon and blod.^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: Most obviously “best,” but note possible pun on Middle English “beste,” meaning “beast.” So one might translate as “creature.” [Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *birds* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forest* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fishes* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sea* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *must* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go mad* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *much sorrow* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bone and blood* [Return to reference °](#)

Alison

Bitweene^o Merch and Averil,
When spray^o biginneth to springe,
The litel fowl hath hire^o wil^o
On hire leod¹ to singe.
Ich^o libbe^o in love-longinge
5 For semlokest^o of alle thinge.
Heo^o may me blisse bringe:
 Ich am in hire baundoun.^o
 An hendy hap ich habbe yhent,²
Ichoot^o from hevene it is me sent:
10 From alle³ wommen my love is lent,^o
And light^o on Alisoun.

On hew^o hire heer^o is fair ynough,
Hire browe browne, hire yë^o blake;
With lossum cheere heo on me lough;⁴
15 With middel^o smal and wel ymake.
But^o heo me wolle^o to hire take
For to been hire owen make,^o
Longe to liven ichulle^o forsake,
And feye^o fallen adown.
20 An hendy hap, etc.⁵

Nightes when I wende^o and wake,
Forthy mine wonges waxeth wan:⁶
Levedy,^o al for thine sake
Longinge is ylent me on.⁷
25 In world nis noon so witer^o man
That al hire bountee^o telle can;
Hire swire^o is whittere^o than the swan,

And fairest may^o in town.
 An hendy, etc.
 30
 Ich am for wowing^o al forwake,^o
 Wery so^o water in wore.⁸
 Lest any reve me^o my make
 Ich habbe y-yerned yore.⁹
 35 Bettere is tholien^o while^o sore
 Than mournen evermore.
 Geinest under gore,¹
 Herkne to my roun:^o
 An hendy, etc.

Endnotes

- Note 1: In her language.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A gracious chance I have received.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, all other.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: With lovely face she on me smiled.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The scribe has abbreviated the poem's refrain.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Therefore my cheeks grow pale.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Longing has come upon me.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Perhaps "millpond."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I have been worrying long since.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Fairest beneath clothing.[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- ^o: *in the seasons of* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *leaves* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *her* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *pleasure* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *I* [Return to reference ^o](#)
- ^o: *live* [Return to reference ^o](#)

- °: *seemliest, fairest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *she*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *power*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *removed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alights*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hue* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hair*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eye*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *waist*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dead*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lady*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whiter*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *maid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wooing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *worn out from waking*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deprive me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to endure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for a time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *song*[Return to reference](#) °

My Lief Is Faren in Londe

My lief is faren in londe¹—
Allas, why is she so?
And I am so sore bonde^o
I may nat come her to.
5 She hath myn herte in holde
Wherever she ride or go^o—
With trewe love a thousand folde.

Endnotes

- Note 1: My beloved has gone away.[Return to reference 1](#)

Notes

- °: *bound*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *walk*[Return to reference °](#)

Western Wind

Westron wind, when will thou blow?
The small rain down can rain.
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

I Am of Ireland

Ich am of Irlonde,
And of the holy londe
Of Irlonde.
Goode sire, praye ich thee,
For of^o sainte charitee,
5 Com and dance with me
In Irlonde.

Notes

- ^o: *sake of* [Return to reference ^o](#)

SIR THOMAS MALORY

ca. 1415–1471

Morte Darthur (Death of Arthur) is the title that William Caxton, the first English printer, gave to Malory's volume, which Caxton described more accurately in his Preface as "the noble histories of King Arthur and of certain of his knights." The volume begins with the mythical story of Arthur's birth. King Uther Pendragon falls in love with the wife of one of his barons. Merlin's magic transforms Uther into the likeness of her husband, and Arthur is born of this union. The volume ends with the destruction of the Round Table and the deaths of Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot, who is Arthur's best knight and the queen's lover. The bulk of the work is taken up with the separate adventures of the knights of the Round Table.

On the evolution of the Arthurian legend, see the headnote to "The Myth of Arthur's Return," [p. 138](#). During the thirteenth century, the stories about Arthur and his knights had been turned into a series of enormously long prose romances in French, and it was these that, as Caxton informed his readers, "Sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French and reduced into English."

Little was known about the author until the early twentieth century when scholars began to unearth the criminal record of a Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell in Warwickshire. In 1451 he was arrested for the first time to prevent his doing injury—presumably further injury—to a priory in Lincolnshire, and shortly thereafter he

was accused of a number of criminal acts. These included escaping from prison after his first arrest, twice breaking into and plundering the Abbey of Coombe, extorting money from various persons, and committing rape. Malory pleaded innocent of all charges. The Wars of the Roses—in which Malory, like the formidable earl of Warwick (the “kingmaker”), whom he seems to have followed, switched sides from Lancaster to York and back again—may account for some of his troubles with the law. After a failed Lancastrian revolt, the Yorkist king, Edward IV, specifically excluded Malory from four amnesties he granted to the Lancastrians.

The identification of this Sir Thomas Malory (there is another candidate with the same name) as the author of the *Morte* was strengthened by the discovery in 1934 of a manuscript that differed from Caxton’s text, the only version previously known. The manuscript contained eight separate romances. Caxton, in order to give the impression of a continuous narrative, had welded these together into twenty-one books, subdivided into short chapters with summary chapter headings. Caxton suppressed all but the last of the personal remarks the author had appended to individual tales in the manuscript. At the very end of the book Malory asks “all gentlemen and gentlewomen that readeth this book pray for me while I am alive that God send me good deliverance.” The discovery of the manuscript revealed that at the close of the first tale he had written: “this was drawyn by a knight presoner Sir Thomas Malleoré, that God sende him good recover.” There is strong circumstantial evidence, therefore, that the book from which the Arthurian legends were passed on to future generations to be adapted in literature, art, and film was written in prison by a man whose violent career might seem at odds with the chivalric ideals he professes.

Such a contradiction—if it really is one—should not be surprising. Nostalgia for an ideal past that never truly existed is typical of much historical romance. Like the slave-owning plantation society of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, whose Southern gentlemen cultivate chivalrous manners and respect for gentlewomen, Malory’s Arthurian world is a fiction. In our terms, it cannot even be labeled

“historical,” although the distinction between romance and history is not one that Malory would have made. Only rarely does he voice skepticism about the historicity of his tale; one such example is his questioning of the myth of Arthur’s return. Much of the tragic power of his romance lies in his sense of the irretrievability of past glory in comparison with the sordidness of his own age.

The success of Malory’s retelling owes much to his development of a terse and direct prose style, especially the naturalistic dialogue that keeps his narrative close to earth. And both he and many of his characters are masters of understatement who express themselves, in moments of great emotional tension, with a bare minimum of words.

In spite of its professed dedication to service of women, Malory’s chivalry is primarily devoted to the fellowship and competitions of aristocratic men. Fighting consists mainly of single combats in tournaments, chance encounters, and battles, which Malory never tires of describing in professional detail. Commoners rarely come into view; when they do, the effect can be chilling—as when pillagers by moonlight plunder the corpses of the knights left on the field of Arthur’s last battle. Above all, Malory cherishes an aristocratic male code of honor for which his favorite word is “worship.” Men win or lose “worship” through their actions in war and love.

The most “worshipful” of Arthur’s knights is Sir Lancelot, the “head of all Christian knights,” as he is called in a moving eulogy by his brother, Sir Ector. But Lancelot is compromised by his fatal liaison with Arthur’s queen and torn between the incompatible loyalties that bind him as an honorable knight, on the one hand, to his lord Arthur and, on the other, to his lady Guinevere. Malory loves his character Lancelot even to the point of indulging in the fleeting speculation, after Lancelot has been admitted to the queen’s chamber, that their activities might have been innocent, “for love that time was not as love is nowadays.” But when the jealousy and malice of two wicked knights force the affair into the open, nothing can avert a mighty civil war; the breaking up of the fellowship of the Round Table; and

the death of Arthur himself, which Malory relates with somber magnificence as the passing of a great era.

From Morte Darthur[1](#)

Endnotes

- Note 1: The selections here are from the section that Caxton called book 20, chaps. 1–4, 8–10, and book 21, chaps. 3–7, 10–12, with omissions. In the Winchester manuscript this section is titled “The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon” (the death of Arthur without reward or compensation). The text is based on Winchester, with some readings introduced from the Caxton edition; spelling has been modernized and modern punctuation added.[Return to reference](#)
[1](#)

[THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST LANCELOT AND GUINEVERE]

In May, when every lusty² heart flourisheth and burgeoneth, for as the season is lusty to behold and comfortable,³ so man and woman rejoiceth and gladdeth of summer coming with his fresh flowers; for winter with his rough winds and blasts causeth lusty men and women to cower and to sit fast by the fire—so this season it befell in the month of May a great anger and unhap that stinted not⁴ till the flower of chivalry of all the world was destroyed and slain. And all was long upon two unhappy⁵ knights which were named Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred that were brethren unto Sir Gawain.⁶ For this Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred had ever a privy⁷ hate unto the Queen, Dame Guinevere, and to Sir Lancelot, and daily and nightly they ever watched upon Sir Lancelot.

So it misfortuned Sir Gawain and all his brethren were in King Arthur's chamber, and then Sir Agravain said thus openly, and not in no counsel,⁸ that many knights might hear: "I marvel that we all be not ashamed both to see and to know how Sir Lancelot lieth daily and nightly by the Queen. And all we know well that it is so, and it is shamefully suffered of us all⁹ that we should suffer so noble a king as King Arthur is to be shamed."

Then spoke Sir Gawain and said, "Brother, Sir Agravain, I pray you and charge you, move no such matters no more afore¹ me, for wit you well, I will not be of your counsel."²

"So God me help," said Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth,³ "we will not be known of your deeds."⁴

"Then will I!" said Sir Mordred.

"I lieve⁵ you well," said Sir Gawain, "for ever unto all unhappiness, sir, ye will grant.⁶ And I would that ye left all this and make you not so busy, for I know," said Sir Gawain, "what will fall of it."⁷

"Fall whatsoever fall may," said Sir Agravain, "I will disclose it to the King."

"Not by my counsel," said Sir Gawain, "for and⁸ there arise war and wrack betwixt⁹ Sir Lancelot and us, wit you well, brother, there will many kings and great lords hold with Sir Lancelot. Also, brother, Sir Agravain," said Sir Gawain, "ye must remember how often times Sir Lancelot hath rescued the King and the Queen. And the best of us all had been full cold at the heart-root¹ had not Sir Lancelot been better than we, and that has he proved himself full oft. And as for my part," said Sir Gawain, "I will never be against Sir Lancelot for² one day's deed, when he rescued me from King Carados of the Dolorous³ Tower and slew him and saved my life. Also, brother, Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred, in like wise Sir Lancelot rescued you both and three score and two⁴ from Sir Tarquin. And therefore, brother, methinks such noble deeds and kindness should be remembered."

"Do as ye list,"⁵ said Sir Agravain, "for I will layne⁶ it no longer." So with these words came in Sir Arthur.

"Now, brother," said Sir Gawain, "stint your noise."⁷

"That will I not," said Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred.

"Well, will ye so?" said Sir Gawain. "Then God speed you, for I will not hear of your tales, neither be of your counsel."

"No more will I," said Sir Gaheris.

"Neither I," said Sir Gareth, "for I shall never say evil by⁸ that man that made me knight." And therewithal they three departed making great dole.⁹

"Alas!" said Sir Gawain and Sir Gareth, "now is this realm wholly destroyed and mischieved,¹ and the noble fellowship of the Round Table shall be disparbeled."²

So they departed, and then King Arthur asked them what noise³ they made. "My lord," said Sir Agravain, "I shall tell you, for I may keep⁴ it no longer. Here is I and my brother Sir Mordred broke⁵ unto my brother Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris, and to Sir Gareth—for this is all, to make it short—how that we know all that Sir Lancelot holdeth your queen, and hath done long; and we be your sister⁶ sons, we may suffer it no longer. And all we woot⁷ that ye should be above Sir

Lancelot, and ye are the king that made him knight, and therefore we will prove it that he is a traitor to your person."

"If it be so," said the King, "wit⁸ you well, he is none other. But I would be loath to begin such a thing but⁹ I might have proofs of it, for Sir Lancelot is an hardy knight, and all ye know that he is the best knight among us all. And but if he be taken with the deed,¹ he will fight with him that bringeth up the noise, and I know no knight that is able to match him. Therefore, and² it be sooth as ye say, I would that he were taken with the deed."

For, as the French book saith, the King was full loath that such a noise should be upon Sir Lancelot and his queen. For the King had a deeming³ of it, but he would not hear of it, for Sir Lancelot had done so much for him and for the Queen so many times that, wit you well, the King loved him passingly⁴ well.

"My lord," said Sir Agravain, "ye shall ride tomorn⁵ on hunting, and doubt ye not, Sir Lancelot will not go with you. And so when it draweth toward night, ye may send the Queen word that ye will lie out all that night, and so may ye send for your cooks. And then, upon pain of death, that night we shall take him with the Queen, and we shall bring him unto you, quick⁶ or dead."

"I will well,"⁷ said the King. "Then I counsel you to take with you sure fellowship."

"Sir," said Sir Agravain, "my brother, Sir Mordred, and I will take with us twelve knights of the Round Table."

"Beware," said King Arthur, "for I warn you, ye shall find him wight."⁸

"Let us deal!"⁹ said Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred.

So on the morn King Arthur rode on hunting and sent word to the Queen that he would be out all that night. Then Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred got to them¹ twelve knights and hid themselves in a chamber in the castle of Carlisle. And these were their names: Sir Colgrevice, Sir Mador de la Porte, Sir Guingalen, Sir Meliot de Logres, Sir Petipace of Winchelsea, Sir Galeron of Galway, Sir Melion de la Mountain, Sir Ascamore, Sir Gromore Somyr Jour, Sir

Curselayne, Sir Florence, and Sir Lovell. So these twelve knights were with Sir Mordred and Sir Agravain, and all they were of Scotland, or else of Sir Gawain's kin, or well-willers² to his brother.

So when the night came, Sir Lancelot told Sir Bors³ how he would go that night and speak with the Queen.

"Sir," said Sir Bors, "ye shall not go this night by my counsel."

"Why?" said Sir Lancelot.

"Sir," said Sir Bors, "I dread me⁴ ever of Sir Agravain that waiteth upon⁵ you daily to do you shame and us all. And never gave my heart against no going that ever ye went⁶ to the queen so much as now, for I mistrust⁷ that the King is out this night from the Queen because peradventure he hath lain⁸ some watch for you and the Queen. Therefore, I dread me sore of some treason."

"Have ye no dread," said Sir Lancelot, "for I shall go and come again and make no tarrying."

"Sir," said Sir Bors, "that me repents,⁹ for I dread me sore that your going this night shall wrath¹ us all."

"Fair nephew," said Sir Lancelot, "I marvel me much why ye say thus, sithen² the Queen hath sent for me. And wit you well, I will not be so much a coward, but she shall understand I will³ see her good grace."

"God speed you well," said Sir Bors, "and send you sound and safe again!"

So Sir Lancelot departed and took his sword under his arm, and so he walked in his mantel,⁴ that noble knight, and put himself in great jeopardy. And so he passed on till he came to the Queen's chamber, and so lightly he was had⁵ into the chamber. And then, as the French book saith, the Queen and Sir Lancelot were together. And whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list⁶ not thereof make no mention, for love that time⁷ was not as love is nowadays.

But thus as they were together there came Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred with twelve knights with them of the Round Table, and they

said with great crying and scaring⁸ voice: "Thou traitor, Sir Lancelot, now are thou taken!" And thus they cried with a loud voice that all the court might hear it. And these fourteen knights all were armed at all points, as⁹ they should fight in a battle.

"Alas!" said Queen Guinevere, "now are we mischieved¹ both!"

"Madam," said Sir Lancelot, "is there here any armor within your chamber that I might cover my body withal? And if there be any, give it me, and I shall soon stint² their malice, by the grace of God!"

"Now, truly," said the Queen, "I have none armor neither helm, shield, sword, neither spear, wherefore I dread me sore our long love is come to a mischievous end. For I hear by their noise there be many noble knights, and well I woot they be surely³ armed, and against them ye may make no resistance. Wherefore ye are likely to be slain, and then shall I be burned! For and⁴ ye might escape them," said the Queen, "I would not doubt but that ye would rescue me in what danger that ever I stood in."

"Alas!" said Sir Lancelot, "in all my life thus was I never bestead⁵ that I should be thus shamefully slain for lack of mine armor."

But ever in one⁶ Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred cried: "Traitor knight, come out of the Queen's chamber! For wit thou well thou art beset so that thou shalt not escape."

"Ah, Jesu mercy!" said Sir Lancelot, "this shameful cry and noise I may not suffer, for better were death at once than thus to endure this pain." Then he took the Queen in his arms and kissed her and said, "Most noblest Christian queen, I beseech you, as ye have been ever my special good lady, and I at all times your poor knight and true unto⁷ my power, and as I never failed you in right nor in wrong sithen the first day King Arthur made me knight, that ye will pray for my soul if that I be slain. For well I am assured that Sir Bors, my nephew, and all the remnant of my kin, with Sir Lavain and Sir Urry,⁸ that they will not fail you to rescue you from the fire. And therefore, mine own lady, recomfort yourself,⁹ whatsoever come of me, that ye go with Sir Bors, my nephew, and Sir Urry and they all will do you all

the pleasure that they may, and ye shall live like a queen upon my lands."

"Nay, Sir Lancelot, nay!" said the Queen. "Wit thou well that I will not live long after thy days. But and¹ ye be slain I will take my death as meekly as ever did martyr take his death for Jesu Christ's sake."

"Well, Madam," said Sir Lancelot, "sith it is so that the day is come that our love must depart,² wit you well I shall sell my life as dear as I may. And a thousandfold," said Sir Lancelot, "I am more heavier³ for you than for myself! And now I had liefer⁴ than to be lord of all Christendom that I had sure armor upon me, that men might speak of my deeds ere ever I were slain."

"Truly," said the Queen, "and⁵ it might please God, I would that they would take me and slay me and suffer⁶ you to escape."

"That shall never be," said Sir Lancelot. "God defend me from such a shame! But, Jesu Christ, be Thou my shield and mine armor!" And therewith Sir Lancelot wrapped his mantel about his arm well and surely; and by then they had gotten a great form⁷ out of the hall, and therewith they all rushed at the door. "Now, fair lords," said Sir Lancelot, "leave⁸ your noise and your rushing, and I shall set open this door, and then may ye do with me what it liketh you."⁹

"Come off,¹ then," said they all, "and do it, for it availeth thee not to strive against us all. And therefore let us into this chamber, and we shall save thy life until thou come to King Arthur."

Then Sir Lancelot unbarred the door, and with his left hand he held it open a little, that but one man might come in at once. And so there came striding a good knight, a much² man and a large, and his name was called Sir Colgrevice of Gore. And he with a sword struck at Sir Lancelot mightily. And he put aside³ the stroke and gave him such a buffet⁴ upon the helmet that he fell groveling dead within the chamber door. Then Sir Lancelot with great might drew the knight within⁵ the chamber door. And then Sir Lancelot, with help of the Queen and her ladies, he was lightly⁶ armed in

Colgreivance's armor. And ever stood Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred, crying, "Traitor knight! Come forth out of the Queen's chamber!"

"Sirs, leave⁷ your noise," said Sir Lancelot, "for wit you well, Sir Agravain, ye shall not prison me this night. And therefore, and⁸ ye do by my counsel, go ye all from this chamber door and make you no such crying and such manner of slander as ye do. For I promise you by my knighthood, and ye will depart and make no more noise, I shall as tomorn appear afore you all and before the King, and then let it be seen which of you all, other else ye all,⁹ that will deprove¹ me of treason. And there shall I answer you, as a knight should, that hither I came to the Queen for no manner of mal engine,² and that will I prove and make it good upon you with my hands."

"Fie upon thee, traitor," said Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred, "for we will have thee malgré thine head³ and slay thee, and we list.⁴ For we let thee wit we have the choice of⁵ King Arthur to save thee other slay thee."

"Ah, sirs," said Sir Lancelot, "is there none other grace with you? Then keep⁶ yourself!" And then Sir Lancelot set all open the chamber door and mightily and knightly he strode in among them. And anon⁷ at the first stroke he slew Sir Agravain, and after twelve of his fellows. Within a little while he had laid them down cold to the earth, for there was none of the twelve knights might stand Sir Lancelot one buffet.⁸ And also he wounded Sir Mordred, and therewithal he fled with all his might.

And then Sir Lancelot returned again unto the Queen and said, "Madam, now wit you well, all our true love is brought to an end, for now will King Arthur ever be my foe. And therefore, Madam, and it like you⁹ that I may have you with me, I shall save you from all manner adventurous¹ dangers."

"Sir, that is not best," said the Queen, "me seemeth, for² now ye have done so much harm, it will be best that ye hold you still with this. And if ye see that as tomorn they will put me unto death, then may ye rescue me as ye think best."

"I will well,"³ said Sir Lancelot, "for have ye no doubt, while I am a man living I shall rescue you." And then he kissed her, and either of them gave other a ring, and so there he left the Queen and went until⁴ his lodging.

Endnotes

- Note 2: Merry.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Pleasant.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Misfortune that ceased not.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: On account of two ill-fated.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Gawain and Agravain are sons of King Lot of Orkney and his wife, Arthur's half-sister Morgause. Mordred is the illegitimate son of Arthur and Morgause.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Secret.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Secret manner.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Put up with by all of us.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Before. "Move": propose.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: On your side. "Wit you well": know well, give you to understand.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sons of King Lot (Gawain's brothers).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A party to your doings.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Believe.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: You will consent to all mischief.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Come of it.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: If.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Strife between.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Would have been dead.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: On account of.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Dismal.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, sixty-two.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: You please.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Conceal.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Stop making scandal.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: About.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Lamentation.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Put to shame.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Dispersed.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Rumor.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Conceal.[Return to reference 4](#)
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- Note 6: Sister's.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Know.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Know.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Unless[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Unless he is caught in the act.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: If.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Suspicion.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Exceedingly.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Tomorrow.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Alive.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Readily agree.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Strong.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Leave it to us.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Gathered to themselves.[Return to reference 1](#)
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- Note 3: Nephew and confidant of Sir Lancelot.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: I am afraid.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Lies in wait for.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Never misgave my heart against any visit you made.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Suspect.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Perhaps he has set.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I regret.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Cause injury to.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Since.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wish to.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Cloak. Lancelot goes without armor.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Quickly he was received.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: I care. "Disports": pastimes.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: At that time.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Terrifying.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Completely, as if.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Come to grief.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Stop.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Securely. "Woot": know.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: If.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Beset.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In unison.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: To the utmost of.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The brother of Elaine, the Fair Maid of Astolat, and a knight miraculously healed of his wound by Sir Lancelot.
- "Remnant": rest.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Take heart again.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: If.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Come to an end.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: More grieved.[Return to reference 3](#)
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- Note 9: Pleases you.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Go ahead.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Big.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Fended off.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Blow.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Inside.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Quickly.[Return to reference 6](#)
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- Note 8: If.[Return to reference 8](#)
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- Note 1: Accuse.[Return to reference 1](#)
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- Note 6: Defend.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Right away.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, withstand (even) one blow (from) Sir Lancelot.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: If it please you.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Perilous.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Because.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Agree.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: To.[Return to reference 4](#)

[WAR BREAKS OUT BETWEEN ARTHUR AND LANCELOT]⁵

Then said King Arthur unto Sir Gawain, "Dear nephew, I pray you make ready in your best armor with your brethren, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, to bring my Queen to the fire, there to have her judgment and receive the death."

"Nay, my most noble king," said Sir Gawain, "that will I never do, for wit you well I will never be in that place where so noble a queen as is my lady Dame Guinevere shall take such a shameful end. For wit you well," said Sir Gawain, "my heart will not serve me for to see her die, and it shall never be said that ever I was of your counsel for her death."

"Then," said the King unto Sir Gawain, "suffer⁶ your brethren Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth to be there."

"My lord," said Sir Gawain, "wit you well they will be loath to be there present because of many adventures⁷ that is like to fall, but they are young and full unable to say you nay."

Then spake Sir Gaheris and the good knight Sir Gareth unto King Arthur: "Sir, ye may well command us to be there, but wit you well it shall be sore against our will. But and⁸ we be there by your strait commandment, ye shall plainly⁹ hold us there excused—we will be there in peaceable wise and bear none harness of war¹ upon us."

"In the name of God," said the King, "then make you ready, for she shall have soon² her judgment."

"Alas," said Sir Gawain, "that ever I should endure³ to see this woeful day." So Sir Gawain turned him and wept heartily, and so he went into his chamber.

And then the Queen was led forth without⁴ Carlisle, and anon she was dispoiled into⁵ her smock. And then her ghostly father⁶ was brought to her to be shriven of her misdeeds.⁷ Then was there weeping and wailing and wringing of hands of many lords and

ladies, but there were but few in comparison that would bear any armor for to strengthen⁸ the death of the Queen.

Then was there one that Sir Lancelot had sent unto that place, which went to espy what time the Queen should go unto her death. And anon as⁹ he saw the Queen dispoiled into her smock and shriven, then he gave Sir Lancelot warning. Then was there but spurring and plucking up¹ of horses, and right so they came unto the fire. And who² that stood against them, there were they slain—there might none withstand Sir Lancelot. So all that bore arms and withstood them, there were they slain, full many a noble knight. * *

* And so in this rushing and hurling, as Sir Lancelot thrang³ here and there, it misfortuned him⁴ to slay Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, the noble knight, for they were unarmed and unwares.⁵ As the French book saith, Sir Lancelot smote Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth upon the brain-pans, wherethrough⁶ that they were slain in the field, howbeit⁷ Sir Lancelot saw them not. And so were they found dead among the thickest of the press.⁸

Then when Sir Lancelot had thus done, and slain and put to flight all that would withstand him, then he rode straight unto Queen Guinevere and made a kirtle⁹ and a gown to be cast upon her, and then he made her to be set behind him and prayed her to be of good cheer. Now wit you well the Queen was glad that she was escaped from death, and then she thanked God and Sir Lancelot.

And so he rode his way with the Queen, as the French book saith, unto Joyous Garde,¹ and there he kept her as a noble knight should. And many great lords and many good knights were sent him, and many full noble knights drew unto him. When they heard that King Arthur and Sir Lancelot were at debate,² many knights were glad, and many were sorry of their debate.

Now turn we again unto King Arthur, that when it was told him how and in what manner the Queen was taken away from the fire, and when he heard of the death of his noble knights, and in especial Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, then he swooned for very pure³ sorrow. And when he awoke of his swoon, then he said: "Alas, that ever I

bore crown upon my head! For now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that ever held Christian king⁴ together. Alas, my good knights be slain and gone away from me. Now within these two days I have lost nigh forty knights and also the noble fellowship of Sir Lancelot and his blood,⁵ for now I may nevermore hold them together with my worship.⁶ Alas, that ever this war began!

"Now, fair fellows," said the King, "I charge you that no man tell Sir Gawain of the death of his two brethren, for I am sure," said the King, "when he heareth tell that Sir Gareth is dead, he will go nigh out of his mind. Mercy Jesu," said the King, "why slew he Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth? For I dare say, as for Sir Gareth, he loved Sir Lancelot above all men earthly."⁷

"That is truth," said some knights, "but they were slain in the hurling,⁸ as Sir Lancelot thrang in the thickest of the press. And as they were unarmed, he smote them and wist⁹ not whom that he smote, and so unhappily¹ they were slain."

"Well," said Arthur, "the death of them will cause the greatest mortal war that ever was, for I am sure that when Sir Gawain knoweth hereof that Sir Gareth is slain, I shall never have rest of him² till I have destroyed Sir Lancelot's kin and himself both, other else he to destroy me. And therefore," said the King, "wit you well, my heart was never so heavy as it is now. And much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss³ than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company. And now I dare say," said King Arthur, "there was never Christian king that ever held such a fellowship together. And alas, that ever Sir Lancelot and I should be at debate. Ah, Agravain, Agravain!" said the King, "Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou and thy brother Sir Mordred haddest unto Sir Lancelot hath caused all this sorrow." And ever among these complaints the King wept and swooned.

Then came there one to Sir Gawain and told him how the Queen was led away with⁴ Sir Lancelot, and nigh a four-and-twenty knights slain. "Ah, Jesu, save me my two brethren!" said Sir Gawain. "For full

well wist I," said Sir Gawain, "that Sir Lancelot would rescue her, other else he would die in that field. And to say the truth he were not of worship but if he had⁵ rescued the Queen, insomuch as she should have been burned for his sake. And as in that," said Sir Gawain, "he hath done but knightly, and as I would have done myself and I had stood in like case. But where are my brethren?" said Sir Gawain. "I marvel that I hear not of them."

Then said that man, "Truly, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth be slain."

"Jesu defend!"⁶ said Sir Gawain. "For all this world I would not that they were slain, and in especial my good brother Sir Gareth."

"Sir," said the man, "he is slain, and that is great pity."

"Who slew him?" said Sir Gawain.

"Sir Lancelot," said the man, "slew them both."

"That may I not believe," said Sir Gawain, "that ever he slew my good brother Sir Gareth, for I dare say my brother loved him better than me and all his brethren and the King both. Also I dare say, an⁷ Sir Lancelot had desired my brother Sir Gareth with him, he would have been with him against the King and us all. And therefore I may never believe that Sir Lancelot slew my brethren."

"Verily, sir," said the man, "it is noised⁸ that he slew him."

"Alas," said Sir Gawain, "now is my joy gone." And then he fell down and swooned, and long he lay there as he had been dead. And when he arose out of his swoon, he cried out sorrowfully and said, "Alas!" And forthwith he ran unto the King, crying and weeping, and said, "Ah, mine uncle King Arthur! My good brother Sir Gareth is slain, and so is my brother Sir Gaheris, which were two noble knights."

Then the King wept and he both, and so they fell on swooning. And when they were revived, then spake Sir Gawain and said, "Sir, I will go and see my brother Sir Gareth."

"Sir, ye may not see him," said the King, "for I caused him to be interred and Sir Gaheris both, for I well understood that ye would make overmuch sorrow, and the sight of Sir Gareth should have caused your double sorrow."

"Alas, my lord," said Sir Gawain, "how slew he my brother Sir Gareth? Mine own good lord, I pray you tell me."

"Truly," said the King, "I shall tell you as it hath been told me—Sir Lancelot slew him and Sir Gaheeris both."

"Alas," said Sir Gawain, "they bore none arms against him, neither of them both."

"I woot not how it was," said the King, "but as it is said, Sir Lancelot slew them in the thickest of the press and knew them not. And therefore let us shape a remedy for to revenge their deaths."

"My king, my lord, and mine uncle," said Sir Gawain, "wit you well, now I shall make you a promise which I shall hold by my knighthood, that from this day forward I shall never fail⁹ Sir Lancelot until that one of us have slain the other. And therefore I require you, my lord and king, dress¹ you unto the wars, for wit you well, I will be revenged upon Sir Lancelot; and therefore, as ye will have my service and my love, now haste you thereto and assay² your friends. For I promise unto God," said Sir Gawain, "for the death of my brother Sir Gareth I shall seek Sir Lancelot throughout seven kings' realms, but I shall slay him, other else he shall slay me."

"Sir, ye shall not need to seek him so far," said the King, "for as I hear say, Sir Lancelot will abide me and us all within the castle of Joyous Garde. And much people draweth unto him, as I hear say."

"That may I right well believe," said Sir Gawain, "but my lord," he said, "assay your friends and I will assay mine."

"It shall be done," said the King, "and as I suppose I shall be big³ enough to drive him out of the biggest tower of his castle."

So then the King sent letters and writs throughout all England, both the length and the breadth, for to summon all his knights. And so unto King Arthur drew many knights, dukes, and earls, that he had a great host, and when they were assembled the King informed them how Sir Lancelot had bereft him his Queen. Then the King and all his host made them ready to lay siege about Sir Lancelot where he lay within Joyous Garde.

Endnotes

- Note 5: Lancelot and Sir Bors mobilize their friends for the rescue of Guinevere. In the morning Mordred reports the events of the night to Arthur who, against Gawain's strong opposition, condemns the queen to be burned, for "the law was such in those days that whatsoever they were, of what estate or degree, if they were found guilty of treason there should be none other remedy but death."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Allow.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Chance occurrences.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: If.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Openly; "strait": strict.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Armor.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Right away.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Live.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Outside.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Undressed down to.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Spiritual father, her priest.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: For her to be confessed of her sins.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Secure.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: As soon as.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Urging forward.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Whoever.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Pressed. "Hurling": turmoil.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: He had the misfortune.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Unaware.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Through which.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Although.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Crowd.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Petticoat.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Lancelot's castle in England.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Strife.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sheer.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: That Christian king ever held.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Kin.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Keep both them and my dignity.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Earthly men.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Turmoil.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Knew.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Unluckily.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: He will never give me any peace.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The loss of my good knights.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: By.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Of honor if he had not.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Forbid.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: If.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Reported.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Give up the pursuit of.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Prepare.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Appeal to.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Strong.[Return to reference 3](#)

[THE DEATH OF ARTHUR]⁴

So upon Trinity Sunday at night King Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream, and in his dream him seemed that he saw upon a chafflet⁵ a chair, and the chair was fast to a wheel, and thereupon sat King Arthur in the richest cloth of gold that might be made. And the King thought there was under him, far from him, an hideous deep black water, and therein was all manner of serpents, and worms, and wild beasts, foul and horrible. And suddenly the King thought that the wheel turned upside down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb. And then the King cried as he lay in his bed, "Help, help!"

And then knights, squires, and yeomen awaked the King, and then he was so amazed⁶ that he wist⁷ not where he was. And then so he awaked⁸ until it was nigh day, and then he fell on slumbering again, not sleeping nor thoroughly waking. So the King seemed⁹ verily that there came Sir Gawain unto him with a number of fair ladies with him. So when King Arthur saw him, he said, "Welcome, my sister's son. I weened ye had been dead. And now I see thee on-live, much am I beholden unto Almighty Jesu. Ah, fair nephew and my sister's son, what been these ladies that hither be come with you?"

"Sir," said Sir Gawain, "all these be ladies for whom I have foughten for when I was man living. And all these are tho¹ that I did battle for in righteous quarrels, and God hath given them that grace, at their great prayer, because I did battle for them for their right, that they should bring me hither unto you. Thus much hath given me leave God, for to warn you of your death. For and ye fight as tomorn² with Sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned,³ doubt ye not ye must be slain, and the most party of your people on both parties. And for the great grace and goodness that Almighty Jesu hath unto you, and for pity of you and many mo other good men there⁴ shall be slain, God hath sent me to you of his special grace to give you

warning that in no wise ye do battle as tomorn, but that ye take a treatise for a month-day.⁵ And proffer you largely,⁶ so that tomorn ye put in a delay. For within a month shall come Sir Lancelot with all his noble knights and rescue you worshipfully and slay Sir Mordred and all that ever will hold with him."

Then Sir Gawain and all the ladies vanished. And anon the King called upon his knights, squires, and yeomen, and charged them wightly⁷ to fetch his noble lords and wise bishops unto him. And when they were come the King told them of his avision,⁸ that Sir Gawain had told him and warned him that, and he fought on the morn, he should be slain. Then the King commanded Sir Lucan the Butler⁹ and his brother Sir Bedivere the Bold, with two bishops with them, and charged them in any wise to take a treatise for a month-day¹ with Sir Mordred. "And spare not: proffer him lands and goods as much as ye think reasonable."

So then they departed and came to Sir Mordred where he had a grim host of an hundred thousand, and there they entreated² Sir Mordred long time. And at the last Sir Mordred was agreed for to have Cornwall and Kent by King Arthur's days,³ and after that, all England, after the days of King Arthur.

Then were they condescended⁴ that King Arthur and Sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and everich⁵ of them should bring fourteen persons. And so they came with this word unto Arthur. Then said he, "I am glad that this is done," and so he went into the field.

And when King Arthur should depart, he warned all his host that, and⁶ they see any sword drawn, "Look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor Sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him." In like wise Sir Mordred warned his host that "And ye see any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely, and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treatise." And in the same wise said Sir Mordred unto his host, "For I know well my father will be avenged upon me."

And so they met as their pointment⁷ was and were agreed and accorded thoroughly. And wine was fetched and they drank together. Right so came an adder out of a little heath-bush, and it stung a knight in the foot. And so when the knight felt him so stung, he looked down and saw the adder. And anon he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought⁸ none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew beams,⁹ trumpets, and horns, and shouted grimly. And so both hosts dressed them¹ together. And King Arthur took his horse and said, "Alas, this unhappy day!" and so rode to his party, and Sir Mordred in like wise.

And never since was there never seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land, for there was but rushing and riding, foining² and striking; and many a grim word was there spoken of either to other, and many a deadly stroke. But ever King Arthur rode throughout the battle³ of Sir Mordred many times and did full nobly, as a noble king should do, and at all times he fainted⁴ never. And Sir Mordred did his devoir⁵ that day and put himself in great peril.

And thus they fought all the long day, and never stinted⁶ till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down.⁷ Then was King Arthur wood-wroth⁸ out of measure when he saw his people so slain from him. And so he looked about him and could see no mo⁹ of all his host, and good knights left no mo on-live, but two knights: the t'one¹ was Sir Lucan the Butler and [the other] his brother Sir Bedivere. And yet they were full sore wounded.

"Jesu, mercy," said the King, "where are all my noble knights become?² Alas that ever I should see this doleful day! For now," said King Arthur, "I am come to mine end. But would to God," said he, "that I wist³ now where were that traitor Sir Mordred that has caused all this mischief."

Then King Arthur looked about and was ware where stood Sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men.

"Now give me my spear," said King Arthur unto Sir Lucan, "for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought."

"Sir, let him be," said Sir Lucan, "for he is unhappy.⁴ And if ye pass this unhappy day ye shall be right well revenged upon him. And, good lord, remember ye of your night's dream, and what the spirit of Sir Gawain told you tonight, and yet God of his great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off by this,⁵ for, blessed be God, ye have won the field: for yet we been here three on-live, and with Sir Mordred is not one on-live. And therefore if ye leave off now, this wicked day of destiny is past."

"Now, tide⁶ me death, tide me life," said the King, "now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands. For at a better avail⁷ shall I never have him."

"God speed you well!" said Sir Bedivere.

Then the King got his spear in both his hands and ran toward Sir Mordred, crying and saying, "Traitor, now is thy deathday come!"

And when Sir Mordred saw King Arthur he ran until him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin⁸ of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom.⁹ And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound, he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr¹ of King Arthur's spear, and right so he smote his father King Arthur with his sword holden in both his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay² of the brain. And therewith Sir Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble King Arthur fell in a swough³ to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere oftentimes heaved him up. And so, weakly betwixt them, they led him to a little chapel not far from the seaside, and when the King was there, him thought him reasonably eased. Then heard they people cry in the field. "Now go thou, Sir Lucan," said the King, "and do me to wit⁴ what betokens that noise in the field."

So Sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places. And so as he yede⁵ he saw and harkened by the moonlight

how that pillers⁶ and robbers were come into the field to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bees⁷ and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead all out there they slew them for their harness⁸ and their riches. When Sir Lucan understood this work, he came to the King as soon as he might and told him all what he had heard and seen. "Therefore by my read,"⁹ said Sir Lucan, "it is best that we bring you to some town."

"I would it were so," said the King, "but I may not stand, my head works¹ so. Ah, Sir Lancelot," said King Arthur, "this day have I sore missed thee. And alas that ever I was against thee, for now have I my death, whereof Sir Gawain me warned in my dream."

Then Sir Lucan took up the King the t'one party² and Sir Bedivere the other party; and in the lifting up the King swooned and in the lifting Sir Lucan fell in a swoon that part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight's heart burst. And when the King awoke he beheld Sir Lucan how he lay foaming at the mouth and part of his guts lay at his feet.

"Alas," said the King, "this is to me a full heavy³ sight to see this noble duke so die for my sake, for he would have holpen⁴ me that had more need of help than I. Alas that he would not complain him for⁵ his heart was so set to help me. Now Jesu have mercy upon his soul."

Then Sir Bedivere wept for the death of his brother.

"Now leave this mourning and weeping, gentle knight," said the King, "for all this will not avail me. For wit thou well, and⁶ I might live myself, the death of Sir Lucan would grieve me evermore. But my time passeth on fast," said the King. "Therefore," said King Arthur unto Sir Bedivere, "take thou here Excalibur⁷ my good sword and go with it to yonder water's side; and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water and come again and tell me what thou sawest there."

"My lord," said Sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done, and [I shall] lightly⁸ bring you word again."

So Sir Bedivere departed. And by the way he beheld that noble sword, that the pommel and the haft⁹ was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, "If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss." And then Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur under a tree. And so, as soon as he might, he came again unto the King and said he had been at the water and had thrown the sword into the water.

"What saw thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waves and winds."

"That is untruly said of thee," said the King. "And therefore go thou lightly again and do my commandment; as thou art to me lief¹ and dear, spare not, but throw it in."

Then Sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand. And yet him thought² sin and shame to throw away that noble sword. And so eft³ he hid the sword and returned again and told the King that he had been at the water and done his commandment.

"What sawest thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan."⁴

"Ah, traitor unto me and untrue," said King Arthur, "now hast thou betrayed me twice. Who would have weened that thou that has been to me so lief and dear, and thou art named a noble knight, and would betray me for the riches of this sword. But now go again lightly, for thy long tarrying putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee I shall slay thee mine⁵ own hands, for thou wouldest for my rich sword see me dead."

Then Sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword and lightly took it up, and so he went to the water's side; and there he bound the girdle⁶ about the hilts, and threw the sword as far into the water as he might. And there came an arm and an hand above the water and took it and clutched it, and shook it thrice and brandished; and then vanished away the hand with the sword into the water. So Sir Bedivere came again to the King and told him what he saw.

"Alas," said the King, "help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried overlong."

Then Sir Bedivere took the King upon his back and so went with him to that water's side. And when they were at the water's side, even fast⁷ by the bank hovered⁸ a little barge with many fair ladies in it; and among them all was a queen; and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur.

"Now put me into that barge," said the King; and so he did softly. And there received him three ladies with great mourning, and so they set them⁹ down. And in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head, and then the queen said, "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught overmuch cold." And anon they rowed fromward the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all tho ladies go froward him.

Then Sir Bedivere cried and said, "Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the King, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I must into the vale of Avilion¹ to heal me of my grievous wound. And if thou hear nevermore of me, pray for my soul."

But ever the queen and ladies wept and shrieked that it was pity to hear. And as soon as Sir Bedivere had lost the sight of the barge he wept and wailed and so took the forest, and went² all that night. And in the morning he was ware betwixt two holts hoar³ of a chapel and an hermitage.⁴

* * *

Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that been authorized,⁵ neither more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read,⁶ but thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens: that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan la Fée,⁷ the

t'other⁸ was the Queen of North Wales, and the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. * * *

Now more of the death of King Arthur could I never find but that these ladies brought him to his burials,⁹ and such one was buried there that the hermit bore witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury.¹ But yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of King Arthur, for this tale Sir Bedivere, a Knight of the Table Round, made it to be written. Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had² by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I will say, Here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.*³

Endnotes

- Note 4:
The pope arranges a truce, Guinevere is returned to Arthur, and Lancelot and his kin leave England to become rulers of France. At Gawain's instigation Arthur invades France to resume the war against Lancelot. Word comes to the king that Mordred has seized the kingdom, and Arthur leads his forces back to England. Mordred attacks them upon their landing, and Gawain is mortally wounded and dies, although not before he has repented for insisting that Arthur fight Lancelot and has written Lancelot to come to the aid of his former lord.
[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Scaffold. "Him seemed": it seemed to him.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Confused.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Knew.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Lay awake.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: It seemed to the king.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Those.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: If you fight tomorrow.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Decided.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, who there. "Mo": more.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: For a month from today. "Treatise": treaty, truce.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Make generous offers.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Quickly.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Dream.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: "Butler" here is probably only a title of high rank, although it was originally used to designate the officer who had charge of wine for the king's table.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: By any means necessary to make a treaty for the period of a month.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Dealt with.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: During King Arthur's lifetime.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Agreed.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Each.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: If.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Arrangement.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Meant.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A kind of trumpet.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Prepared to come.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lunging.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Battalion.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Lost heart.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Knightly duty.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Stopped.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Upland.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Mad with rage.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Others.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That one, the first.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: What has become of all my noble knights?[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Knew.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, unlucky for you.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: That is, with this much accomplished.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Betide.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Advantage.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Thrust.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, six feet.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Hand guard.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Outer membrane.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Swoon.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Let me know.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Walked.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Plunderers.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Bracelets.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Armor. "All out": entirely.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Advice.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Aches.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: On one side.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sorrowful.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Helped.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Because.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: If.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The sword that Arthur had received as a young man from the Lady of the Lake; it is presumably she who catches it when Bedivere finally throws it into the water.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Quickly.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Handle. "Pommel": rounded knob on the hilt.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Beloved.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: It seemed to him.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Again.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The phrase seems to mean "waters wash the shore and waves grow dark."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, with mine.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Sword belt.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Close.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Waited.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, they sat.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly paradise.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Walked. "Took": took to.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Ancient thickets of small trees.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the passage here omitted, Sir Bedivere meets the former bishop of Canterbury, now a hermit, who describes how on the previous night a company of ladies had brought to the chapel a dead body, asking that it be buried. Sir Bedivere exclaims that the dead man must have been King Arthur and vows to spend the rest of his life there in the chapel as a hermit.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That have authority.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Tell.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The fairy.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The second.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Grave.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Of whom the hermit, who was formerly bishop of Canterbury, bore witness.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Conveyed.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Here lies Arthur, who was once king and king will be again (Latin).[Return to reference 3](#)

[THE DEATHS OF LANCELOT AND GUINEVERE]⁴

And thus upon a night there came a vision to Sir Lancelot and charged him, in remission⁵ of his sins, to haste him unto Amesbury: "And by then⁶ thou come there, thou shalt find Queen Guinevere dead. And therefore take thy fellows with thee, and purvey them of an horse-bier,⁷ and fetch thou the corse⁸ of her, and bury her by her husband, the noble King Arthur. So this avision⁹ came to Lancelot thrice in one night. Then Sir Lancelot rose up ere day and told the hermit.

"It were well done," said the hermit, "that ye made you ready and that ye disobey not the avision."

Then Sir Lancelot took his eight fellows with him, and on foot they yede¹ from Glastonbury to Amesbury, the which is little more than thirty mile, and thither they came within two days, for they were weak and feeble to go. And when Sir Lancelot was come to Amesbury within the nunnery, Queen Guinevere died but half an hour afore. And the ladies told Sir Lancelot that Queen Guinevere told them all ere she passed that Sir Lancelot had been priest near a twelve-month:² "and hither he cometh as fast as he may to fetch my corse, and beside my lord King Arthur he shall bury me." Wherefore the Queen said in hearing of them all, "I beseech Almighty God that I may never have power to see Sir Lancelot with my worldly eyes."

"And thus," said all the ladies, "was ever her prayer these two days till she was dead."

Then Sir Lancelot saw her visage, but he wept not greatly, but sighed. And so he did all the observance of the service himself, both the *dirige*³ and on the morn he sang mass. And there was ordained⁴ an horse-bier, and so with an hundred torches ever burning about the corse of the Queen, and ever Sir Lancelot with his eight fellows went about⁵ the horse-bier, singing and reading many an holy orison,⁶ and frankincense upon the corse incensed.⁷

Thus Sir Lancelot and his eight fellows went on foot from Amesbury unto Glastonbury, and when they were come to the chapel and the hermitage, there she had a *dirige* with great devotion.⁸ And on the morn the hermit that sometime⁹ was Bishop of Canterbury sang the mass of requiem with great devotion, and Sir Lancelot was the first that offered, and then als¹ his eight fellows. And then she was wrapped in cered cloth of Rennes, from the top² to the toe, in thirtyfold, and after she was put in a web³ of lead, and then in a coffin of marble.

And when she was put in the earth Sir Lancelot swooned and lay long still, while⁴ the hermit came and awaked him, and said, "Ye be to blame, for ye displease God with such manner of sorrow-making."

"Truly," said Sir Lancelot, "I trust I do not displease God, for He knoweth mine intent—for my sorrow was not, nor is not, for any rejoicing of sin, but my sorrow may never have end. For when I remember of her beaulté and of her noblesse⁵ that was both with her king and with her,⁶ so when I saw his corse and her corse so lie together, truly mine heart would not serve to sustain my careful⁷ body. Also when I remember me how by my defaute and mine orgule⁸ and my pride that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living of Christian people, wit you well," said Sir Lancelot, "this remembered, of their kindness and mine unkindness, sank so to mine heart that I might not sustain myself." So the French book maketh mention.

Then Sir Lancelot never after ate but little meat,⁹ nor drank, till he was dead, for then he sickened more and more and dried and dwined¹ away. For the Bishop nor none of his fellows might not make him to eat, and little he drank, that he was waxen by a kibbet² shorter than he was, that the people could not know him. For evermore, day and night, he prayed, but sometime he slumbered a broken sleep. Ever he was lying groveling on the tomb of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, and there was no comfort that the Bishop nor Sir Bors, nor none of his fellows could make him—it availed not.

So within six weeks after, Sir Lancelot fell sick and lay in his bed. And then he sent for the Bishop that there was hermit, and all his true fellows. Then Sir Lancelot said with dreary steven,³ "Sir Bishop, I pray you give to me all my rights that longeth⁴ to a Christian man."

"It shall not need you,"⁵ said the hermit and all his fellows. "It is but heaviness of your blood. Ye shall be well mended by the grace of God tomorn."

"My fair lords," said Sir Lancelot, "wit you well my careful body will into the earth; I have warning more than now I will say. Therefore give me my rights."

So when he was houseled and annealed⁶ and had all that a Christian man ought to have, he prayed the Bishop that his fellows might bear his body to Joyous Garde. (Some men say it was Alnwick, and some men say it was Bamborough.) "Howbeit," said Sir Lancelot, "me repenteth⁷ sore, but I made mine avow sometime that in Joyous Garde I would be buried. And because of breaking⁸ of mine avow, I pray you all, lead me thither." Then there was weeping and wringing of hands among his fellows.

So at a season of the night they all went to their beds, for they all lay in one chamber. And so after midnight, against⁹ day, the Bishop that was hermit, as he lay in his bed asleep, he fell upon a great laughter. And therewith all the fellowship awoke and came to the Bishop and asked him what he ailed.¹

"Ah, Jesu mercy," said the Bishop, "why did ye awake me? I was never in all my life so merry and so well at ease."

"Wherefore?" said Sir Bors.

"Truly," said the Bishop, "here was Sir Lancelot with me, with mo² angels than ever I saw men in one day. And I saw the angels heave³ up Sir Lancelot unto heaven, and the gates of heaven opened against him."

"It is but dretching of swevens,"⁴ said Sir Bors, "for I doubt not Sir Lancelot aileth nothing but good."⁵

"It may well be," said the Bishop. "Go ye to his bed and then shall ye prove the sooth."

So when Sir Bors and his fellows came to his bed, they found him stark dead. And he lay as he had smiled, and the sweetest savor⁶ about him that ever they felt. Then was there weeping and wringing of hands, and the greatest dole they made that ever made men. And on the morn the Bishop did his mass of Requiem, and after the Bishop and all the nine knights put Sir Lancelot in the same horse-bier that Queen Guinevere was laid in tofore that she was buried. And so the Bishop and they all together went with the body of Sir Lancelot daily, till they came to Joyous Garde. And ever they had an hundred torches burning about him.

And so within fifteen days they came to Joyous Garde. And there they laid his corse in the body of the choir,⁷ and sang and read many psalters⁸ and prayers over him and about him. And ever his visage was laid open and naked, that all folks might behold him; for such was the custom in tho⁹ days that all men of worship should so lie with open visage till that they were buried.

And right thus as they were at their service, there came Sir Ector de Maris that had seven year sought all England, Scotland, and Wales, seeking his brother, Sir Lancelot. And when Sir Ector heard such noise and light in the choir of Joyous Garde, he alight and put his horse from him and came into the choir. And there he saw men sing and weep, and all they knew Sir Ector, but he knew not them. Then went Sir Bors unto Sir Ector and told him how there lay his brother, Sir Lancelot, dead. And then Sir Ector threw his shield, sword, and helm from him, and when he beheld Sir Lancelot's visage, he fell down in a swoon. And when he waked, it were hard any tongue to tell the doleful complaints that he made for his brother.

"Ah, Lancelot!" he said, "thou were head of all Christian knights. And now I dare say," said Sir Ector, "thou Sir Lancelot, there thou liest, that thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand. And thou were the courteoust¹ knight that ever bore shield. And thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse, and

thou were the truest lover, of a sinful man,² that ever loved woman, and thou were the kindest man that ever struck with sword. And thou were the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights, and thou was the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies, and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.”³

Then there was weeping and dolor out of measure.

Thus they kept Sir Lancelot’s corse aloft fifteen days, and then they buried it with great devotion. And then at leisure they went all with the Bishop of Canterbury to his hermitage, and there they were together more than a month.

Then Sir Constantine that was Sir Cador’s son of Cornwall was chosen king of England, and he was a full noble knight, and worshipfully he ruled this realm. And then this King Constantine sent for the Bishop of Canterbury, for he heard say where he was. And so he was restored unto his bishopric and left that hermitage, and Sir Bedivere was there ever still hermit to his life’s end.

Then Sir Bors de Ganis, Sir Ector de Maris, Sir Gahalantine, Sir Galihud, Sir Galihodin, Sir Blamour, Sir Bleoberis, Sir Villiars le Valiant, Sir Clarrus of Clermount, all these knights drew them to their countries.⁴ Howbeit⁵ King Constantine would have had them with him, but they would not abide in this realm. And there they all lived in their countries as holy men.

And some English books make mention that they went never out of England after the death of Sir Lancelot—but that was but favor of makers.⁶ For the French book maketh mention—and is authorized—that Sir Bors, Sir Ector, Sir Blamour, and Sir Bleoberis went into the Holy Land, whereas Jesu Christ was quick⁷ and dead, and anon as they had stablished their lands,⁸ for the book saith so Sir Lancelot commanded them for to do ere ever he passed out of this world. There these four knights did many battles upon the miscreaunts,⁹ or Turks, and there they died upon a Good Friday for God’s sake.

Here is the end of the whole book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table, that when they were whole together there was ever an hundred and forty. And here is the end of *The Death of Arthur*.¹

I pray you all gentlemen and gentlewomen that readeth this book of Arthur and his knights from the beginning to the ending, pray for me while I am alive that God send me good deliverance. And when I am dead, I pray you all pray for my soul.

For this book was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth, by Sir Thomas Malory, knight, as Jesu help him for His great might, as he is the servant of Jesu both day and night.

1469–70 1485

Endnotes

- Note 4: Guinevere enters a convent at Amesbury, where Lancelot, returned with his companions to England, visits her, but she commands him never to see her again. Emulating her example, Lancelot joins the bishop of Canterbury and Bedivere in their hermitage, where he takes holy orders and is joined in turn by seven of his fellow knights.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: For the remission.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: By the time.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Provide them with a horse-drawn hearse.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Body.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Dream.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Went.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Nearly twelve months.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Literally, “direct [my way]” (Latin source of modern “dirge”): the first word of the anthem beginning the funeral service.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Prepared.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Around.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Reciting many a prayer.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Burned frankincense over the body.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Earnest reverence.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Once.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Also. "Offered": made his donation.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Head. "Cloth of Rennes": A shroud made of fine linen smeared with wax, produced at Rennes.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Afterward she was put in a sheet.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Until.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Her beauty and nobility.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That she and her king both had.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Sorrowful.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: My fault and my haughtiness.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Food.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Wasted.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Grown by a cubit.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sad voice.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Pertains. "Rights": last sacrament of extreme unction.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: You shall not need it.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Given communion and extreme unction.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: I am sorry.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In order not to break.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Toward.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Ailed him.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: More.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Lift.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Illusion of dreams.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Has nothing wrong with him.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Odor. A sweet scent is a conventional sign in saints' lives of a sanctified death.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: The center of the chancel, the place of honor.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Psalms.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Those.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Most courteous.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Of any man born in original sin.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Support for the butt of the lance.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Withdrew themselves to their home districts.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: However.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The authors' bias.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Living. "Thereas": where.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: As soon as they had put their lands in order.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Infidels.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: By the "whole book" Malory refers to the entire work; the *Death of Arthur*, which Caxton made the title of the entire work, refers to the last part of Malory's book.[Return to reference 1](#)

EVERYMAN after 1485

Everyman belongs to the midpoint of the morality play's history. The surviving examples of this genre include only a handful from the fifteenth century (for example, the earliest, *The Pride of Life*, ca. 1400) but more than two dozen from the sixteenth century, dating as late as 1579 (*The Marriage between Wit and Wisdom*). Morality plays apparently originated side by side with the mystery plays (see [p. 247](#)) but were composed individually rather than in cycles and were dominated by allegorical characters. Some morality plays addressed such diverse subjects as social and political satire (*All for Money*, Skelton's *Magnificence*), philosophy of education (*The Marriage of Wit and Science*), Protestant polemic (*The Conflict of Conscience*), prudential morality (*The Contention between Liberality and Prodigality*), and natural science (*The Nature of the Four Elements*). From first to last, however, the dominant theme was the struggle of good and evil for the human soul (*psychomachia*), usually depicted in the life span of a representative figure with a name like "Mankind." *Everyman*, untypically, is devoted entirely to the day of judgment that every individual human being must face eventually. The play represents allegorically the forces—both outside the protagonist and within—that can help save Everyman and those that cannot or that obstruct his salvation.

Everyman lacks the broad (even slapstick) humor of many morality plays that portray as clowns the vices that try to lure the

Everyman figure away from salvation. The play does contain a certain grim humor in showing the haste with which the hero's fair-weather friends abandon him when they discover what his problem is. The play inculcates its austere lesson by the simplicity and directness of its language and of its approach. A sense of urgency builds—one by one Everyman's supposed resources fail him as time is running out. Ultimately Knowledge teaches him the lesson that every pre-Reformation Christian must learn in order to be saved (and that every post-Reformation Christian who believed in grace alone had to unlearn): that Good Deeds is his only true friend who will accompany him on his perilous journey.

The play was written near the end of the fifteenth century. It is probably a translation of a Flemish play, although it is possible that the Flemish play is the translation and the English *Everyman* the original.

Everyman¹

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MESSENGER		KNOWLEDGE
GOD		CONFESSION
DEATH		BEAUTY
EVERYMAN		STRENGTH
FELLOWSHIP		DISCRETION
KINDRED		FIVE-WITS
COUSIN		ANGEL
GOODS		DOCTOR
GOOD DEEDS		

HERE BEGINNETH A TREATISE HOW THE HIGH FATHER OF HEAVEN SENDETH DEATH
TO SUMMON EVERY CREATURE TO COME AND GIVE ACCOUNT OF THEIR LIVES IN THIS
WORLD, AND IS IN MANNER OF A MORAL PLAY

[*Enter* MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER I pray you all give your audience,^o
And hear this matter with reverence,^o
By figure^o a moral play.
The Summoning of Everyman called it is,
That of our lives and ending shows
5 How transitory we be all day.^o
The matter is wonder precious,
But the intent of it is more gracious
And sweet to bear away.
The story saith: Man, in the beginning
10 Look well, and take good heed to the ending,
Be you never so gay.
You think sin in the beginning full sweet,
Which in the end causeth the soul to weep,
When the body lieth in clay.
15 Here shall you see how fellowship and jollity,
Both strength, pleasure, and beauty,
Will fade from thee as flower in May.
For ye shall hear how our Heaven-King
Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning.
20 Give audience and hear what he doth say.

[*Exit* MESSENGER.—*Enter* GOD.]

GOD I perceive, here in my majesty,
How that all creatures be to me unkind,^o
Living without dread in worldly prosperity.
Of ghostly^o sight the people be so blind,
25 Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God.
In worldly riches is all their mind:

They fear not of my righteousness the sharp rod;
My law that I showed when I for them died
They forget clean, and shedding of my blood red.
30 I hanged between two,² it cannot be denied:
To get them life I suffered to be dead.^o
I healed their feet, with thorns hurt was my head.
I could do no more than I did, truly—
And now I see the people do clean forsake me.
35 They use the seven deadly sins damnable,
As pride, coveitise,^o wrath, and lechery³
Now in the world be made commendable.
And thus they leave of angels the heavenly company.
Every man liveth so after his own pleasure,
40 And yet of their life they be nothing sure.
I see the more that I them forbear,
The worse they be from year to year:
All that liveth appaireth^o fast.
Therefore I will, in all the haste,
45 Have a reckoning of every man's person.
For, and^o I leave the people thus alone
In their life and wicked tempests,
Verily they will become much worse than beasts;
For now one would by envy another up eat.
50 Charity do they all clean forgeet.
I hoped well that every man
In my glory should make his mansion,
And thereto I had them all elect.^o
But now I see, like traitors deject,^o
55 They thank me not for the pleasure that I to^o them
meant,
Nor yet for their being that I them have lent.
I proffered the people great multitude of mercy,
And few there be that asketh it heartily.^o
They be so cumbered^o with worldly riches
60 That needs on them I must do justice—

On every man living without fear.
Where art thou, Death, thou mighty messenger?

[*Enter* DEATH.]

DEATH Almighty God, I am here at your will,
Your commandment to fulfill.

65 GOD Go thou to Everyman,
And show him, in my name,
A pilgrimage he must on him take,
Which he in no wise may escape;
70 And that he bring with him a sure reckoning
Without delay or any tarrying.

DEATH Lord, I will in the world go run over all,°
And cruelly out-search both great and small.

[*Exit* GOD.]

Everyman will I beset that liveth beastly
Out of God's laws, and dreadeth not folly.
75 He that loveth riches I will strike with my dart,
His sight to blind, and from heaven to depart°
Except that Almsdeeds be his good friend—
In hell for to dwell, world without end.
80 Lo, yonder I see Everyman walking:
Full little he thinketh on my coming;
His mind is on fleshly lusts and his treasure,
And great pain it shall cause him to endure
Before the Lord, Heaven-King.

[*Enter* EVERYMAN.]

85 Everyman, stand still! Whither art thou going
Thus gaily? Hast thou thy Maker forget?°

EVERYMAN Why askest thou?

Why wouldest thou weet?°

DEATH Yea, sir, I will show you:

90 In great haste I am sent to thee
 From God out of his majesty.
 EVERYMAN What! sent to me?
 DEATH Yea, certainly.
 Though thou have forgot him here,
 He thinketh on thee in the heavenly sphere,
 95 As, ere we depart, thou shalt know.
 EVERYMAN What desireth God of me?⁴
 DEATH That shall I show thee:
 A reckoning he will needs have
 Without any longer respite.
 100 EVERYMAN To give a reckoning longer leisure I crave.^o
 This blind^o matter troubleth my wit.^o
 DEATH On thee thou must take a long journey:
 Therefore thy book of count^o with thee thou bring,
 For turn again thou cannot by no way.
 105 And look thou be sure of thy reckoning,
 For before God thou shalt answer and shew
 Thy many bad deeds and good but a few—
 How thou hast spent thy life and in what wise,
 Before the Chief Lord of Paradise.
 110 Have ado that we were in that way,⁵
 For weet^o thou well thou shalt make none attorney.⁶
 EVERYMAN Full unready I am such reckoning to give.
 I know thee not. What messenger art thou?
 DEATH I am Death that no man dreadeth,⁷
 115 For every man I 'rest,^o and no man spareth;
 For it is God's commandment
 That all to me should be obedient.
 EVERYMAN O Death, thou comest when I had thee least
 in mind.
 In thy power it lieth me to save:
 120 Yet of my good^o will I give thee, if thou will be kind,
 Yea, a thousand pound shalt thou have—
 And defer this matter till another day.

DEATH Everyman, it may not be, by no way.
 I set nought by⁸ gold, silver, nor riches,
 125 Nor by pope, emperor, king, duke, nor princes,
 For, and^o I would receive gifts great,
 All the world I might get.
 But my custom is clean contrary:
 I give thee no respite. Come hence and not tarry!
 130 EVERYMAN Alas, shall I have no longer respite?
 I may say Death giveth no warning.
 To think on thee it maketh my heart sick,
 For all unready is my book of reckoning.
 But twelve year and I might have a bidding,⁹
 135 My counting-book I would make so clear
 That my reckoning I should not need to fear.
 Wherefore, Death, I pray thee, for God's mercy,
 Spare me till I be provided of remedy.
 DEATH Thee availeth not to cry, weep, and pray;
 140 But haste thee lightly^o that thou were gone that
 journey
 And prove^o thy friends, if thou can.
 For weet^o thou well the tide^o abideth no man,
 And in the world each living creature
 For Adam's sin must die of nature.¹
 145 EVERYMAN Death, if I should this pilgrimage take
 And my reckoning surely make,
 Show me, for saint^o charity,
 Should I not come again shortly?
 DEATH No, Everyman. And^o thou be once there,
 150 Thou mayst never more come here,
 Trust me verily.
 EVERYMAN O gracious God in the high seat celestial,
 Have mercy on me in this most need!
 Shall I have company from this vale terrestrial
 155 Of mine acquaintance that way me to lead?
 DEATH Yea, if any be so hardy

That would go with thee and bear thee company.
Hie^o thee that thou were gone to God's
magnificence,
Thy reckoning to give before his presence.
160 What, weenest^o thou thy life is given thee,
And thy worldly goods also?
EVERYMAN I had weened so, verily.
DEATH Nay, nay, it was but lent thee.
For as soon as thou art go,
165 Another a while shall have it and then go therefro,²
Even as thou hast done.
Everyman, thou art mad! Thou hast thy wits^o five,
And here on earth will not amend thy live!³
For suddenly I do come.
170 EVERYMAN O wretched caitiff! Whither shall I flee
That I might 'scape this endless sorrow?
Now, gentle Death, spare me till tomorrow,
That I may amend me
With good advisement.^o
175 DEATH Nay, thereto I will not consent,
Nor no man will I respite,
But to the heart suddenly I shall smite,
Without any advisement.^o
And now out of thy sight I will me hie:
180 See thou make thee ready shortly,
For thou mayst say this is the day
That no man living may 'scape away.

[*Exit* DEATH.]

EVERYMAN Alas, I may well weep with sighs deep:
Now have I no manner of company
185 To help me in my journey and me to keep.^o
And also my writing^o is full unready—
How shall I do now for to excuse me?
I would to God I had never be geet!^o

190 To my soul a full great profit it had be.
For now I fear pains huge and great.
The time passeth: Lord, help, that all wrought!
For though I mourn, it availeth nought.
The day passeth and is almost ago:°
I wot° not well what for to do.
195 To whom were I best my complaint to make?
What and° I to Fellowship thereof spake,
And showed him of this sudden chance?
For in him is all mine affiance,°
200 We have in the world so many a day
Be good friends in sport and play.
I see him yonder, certainly.
I trust that he will bear me company.
Therefore to him will I speak to ease my sorrow.

[*Enter* FELLOWSHIP.]

205 Well met, good Fellowship, and good morrow!
FELLOWSHIP Everyman, good morrow, by this day!
Sir, why lookest thou so piteously?
If anything be amiss, I pray thee me say,
That I may help to remedy.
EVERYMAN Yea, good Fellowship, yea:
210 I am in great jeopardy.
FELLOWSHIP My true friend, show to me your mind.
I will not forsake thee to my life's end
In the way of good company.
EVERYMAN That was well spoken, and lovingly!
215 FELLOWSHIP Sir, I must needs know your heaviness.°
I have pity to see you in any distress.
If any have you wronged, ye shall revenged be,
Though I on the ground be slain for thee,
Though that I know before that I should die.
220 EVERYMAN Verily, Fellowship, gramercy.°
FELLOWSHIP Tush! by thy thanks I set not a stree.°

Show me your grief and say no more.
 EVERYMAN If I my heart should to you break,^o
 And then you to turn your mind fro me,
 225 And would not me comfort when ye hear me speak,
 Then should I ten times sorrier be.
 FELLOWSHIP Sir, I say as I will do, indeed.
 EVERYMAN Then be you a good friend at need.
 I have found you true herebefore.
 230 FELLOWSHIP And so ye shall evermore.
 For, in faith, and^o thou go to hell,
 I will not forsake thee by the way.
 EVERYMAN Ye speak like a good friend. I believe you
 well.
 I shall deserve^o it, and^o I may.
 235 FELLOWSHIP I speak of no deserving, by this day!
 For he that will say and nothing do
 Is not worthy with good company to go.
 Therefore show me the grief of your mind,
 As to your friend most loving and kind.
 240 EVERYMAN I shall show you how it is:
 Commanded I am to go a journey,
 A long way, hard and dangerous,
 And give a strait^o count,^o without delay,
 Before the high judge Adonai.^o
 245 Wherefore I pray you bear me company,
 As ye have promised, in this journey.
 FELLOWSHIP This is matter indeed! Promise is duty—
 But, and^o I should take such a voyage on me,
 I know it well, it should be to my pain.
 250 Also it maketh me afeard, certain.
 But let us take counsel here, as well as we can—
 For your words would fear^o a strong man.
 EVERYMAN Why, ye said if I had need,
 Ye would me never forsake, quick ne dead,
 255 Though it were to hell, truly.
 FELLOWSHIP So I said, certainly,

But such pleasures^o be set aside, the sooth to say.
 And also, if we took such a journey,
 When should we again come?
 260 EVERYMAN Nay, never again, till the day of doom.
 FELLOWSHIP In faith, then will not I come there!
 Who hath you these tidings brought?
 EVERYMAN Indeed, Death was with me here.
 FELLOWSHIP Now by God that all hath bought,^o
 265 If Death were the messenger,
 For no man that is living today
 I will not go that loath^o journey—
 Not for the father that begat me!
 EVERYMAN Ye promised otherwise, pardie.^o
 270 FELLOWSHIP I wot well I said so, truly.
 And yet, if thou wilt eat and drink and make good
 cheer,
 Or haunt to women the lusty company,⁴
 I would not forsake you while the day is clear,
 Trust me verily!
 275 EVERYMAN Yea, thereto ye would be ready—
 To go to mirth, solace,^o and play:
 Your mind to folly will sooner apply^o
 Than to bear me company in my long journey.
 FELLOWSHIP Now in good faith, I will not that way.
 280 But, and^o thou will murder or any man kill,
 In that I will help thee with a good will.
 EVERYMAN O that is simple^o advice, indeed!
 Gentle fellow, help me in my necessity:
 We have loved long, and now I need—
 285 And now, gentle Fellowship, remember me!
 FELLOWSHIP Whether ye have loved me or no,
 By Saint John, I will not with thee go!
 EVERYMAN Yet I pray thee take the labor and do so
 much for me,
 290 To bring me forward,^o for saint charity,

And comfort me till I come without the town.
FELLOWSHIP Nay, and^o thou would give me a new
gown,
I will not a foot with thee go.
But, and^o thou had tarried, I would not have left
thee so.
And as now, God speed thee in thy journey!
295 For from thee I will depart as fast as I may.
EVERYMAN Whither away, Fellowship? Will thou forsake
me?
FELLOWSHIP Yea, by my fay!^o To God I betake^o thee.
EVERYMAN Farewell, good Fellowship! For thee my
heart is sore.
Adieu forever—I shall see thee no more.
300 FELLOWSHIP In faith, Everyman, farewell now at the
ending:
For you I will remember that parting is mourning.

[*Exit* FELLOWSHIP.]

EVERYMAN Alack, shall we thus depart^o indeed—
Ah, Lady, help!⁵—without any more comfort?
Lo, Fellowship forsaketh me in my most need!
305 For help in this world whither shall I resort?
Fellowship herebefore^o with me would merry make,
And now little sorrow for me doth he take.
It is said, "In prosperity men friends may find
Which in adversity be full unkind."
310 Now whither for succor^o shall I flee,
Sith^o that Fellowship hath forsaken me?
To my kinsmen I will, truly,
Praying them to help me in my necessity.
I believe that they will do so,
315 For kind will creep where it may not go.⁶
I will go 'say^o—for yonder I see them—
Where^o be ye now my friends and kinsmen.

[*Enter* KINDRED *and* COUSIN.]

- KINDRED Here be we now at your commandment:
Cousin, I pray you show us your intent
320 In any wise, and not spare.
- COUSIN Yea, Everyman, and to us declare
If ye be disposed to go anywhither.
For, weete^o you well, we will live and die together.
- KINDRED In wealth and woe we will with you hold,
325 For over his kin a man may be bold.⁷
- EVERYMAN Gramercy,^o my friends and kinsmen kind.
Now shall I show you the grief of my mind.
I was commanded by a messenger
That is a high king's chief officer:
330 He bade me go a pilgrimage, to my pain—
And I know well I shall never come again.
Also I must give a reckoning strait,^o
For I have a great enemy that hath me in wait,⁸
Which intendeth me to hinder.
- 335 KINDRED What account is that which ye must render?
That would I know.
- EVERYMAN Of all my works I must show
How I have lived and my days spent;
Also of ill deeds that I have used
340 In my time sith^o life was me lent,
And of all virtues that I have refused.
Therefore I pray you go thither with me
To help me make mine account, for saint^o charity.
- COUSIN What, to go thither? Is that the matter?
345 Nay, Everyman, I had liefer fast⁹ bread and water
All this five year and more!
- EVERYMAN Alas, that ever I was bore!^o
For now shall I never be merry
If that you forsake me.
- 350 KINDRED Ah, sir, what? Ye be a merry man:

Take good heart to you and make no moan.
But one thing I warn you, by Saint Anne,
As for me, ye shall go alone.

- EVERYMAN My Cousin, will you not with me go?
355 COUSIN No, by Our Lady! I have the cramp in my toe:
Trust not to me. For, so God me speed,o
I will deceive you in your most need.
KINDRED It availeth you not us to 'tice.o
Ye shall have my maid with all my heart:
360 She loveth to go to feasts, there to be nice,o
And to dance, and abroad to start.1
I will give her leave to help you in that journey,
If that you and she may agree.
EVERYMAN Now show me the very effecto of your mind:
365 Will you go with me or abide behind?
KINDRED Abide behind? Yea, that will I ando I may!
Therefore farewell till another day.

[*Exit* KINDRED.]

- EVERYMAN How should I be merry or glad?
For fair promises men to me make,
370 But when I have most need they me forsake.
I am deceived. That maketh me sad.
COUSIN Cousin Everyman, farewell now,
For verily I will not go with you;
Also of mine own an unready reckoning
375 I have to account—therefore I make tarrying.
Now God keep thee, for now I go.

[*Exit* COUSIN.]

- EVERYMAN Ah, Jesus, is all come hereto?o
Lo, fair words maketh fools fain:o
They promise and nothing will do, certain.
380 My kinsmen promised me faithfully

For to abide with me steadfastly,
And now fast away do they flee.
Even so Fellowship promised me.
What friend were best me of to provide?
385 I lose my time here longer to abide.
Yet in my mind a thing there is:
All my life I have loved riches;
If that my Good^o now help me might,
He would make my heart full light.
390 I will speak to him in this distress.
Where art thou, my Goods and riches?
GOODS [*within*] Who calleth me? Everyman? What,
hast thou haste?
I lie here in corners, trussed and piled so high,
And in chests I am locked so fast—
395 Also sacked in bags—thou mayst see with thine eye
I cannot stir, in packs low where I lie.
What would ye have? Lightly^o me say.
EVERYMAN Come hither, Good, in all the haste thou
may,
For of counsel I must desire thee.
400

[*Enter* GOODS.]

GOODS Sir, and^o ye in the world have sorrow or
adversity,²
That can I help you to remedy shortly.
EVERYMAN It is another disease^o that grieveth me:
In this world it is not, I tell thee so.
I am sent for another way to go,
405 To give a strait count general
Before the highest Jupiter^o of all.
And all my life I have had joy and pleasure in thee:
Therefore I pray thee go with me,
For, peradventure, thou mayst before God Almighty
410 My reckoning help to clean and purify.

For it is said ever among^o
 That money maketh all right that is wrong.
 GOODS Nay, Everyman, I sing another song:
 I follow no man in such voyages.
 415 For, and^o I went with thee,
 Thou shouldest fare much the worse for me;
 For because on me thou did set thy mind,
 Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind,^o
 That thine account thou cannot make truly—
 420 And that hast thou for the love of me.
 EVERYMAN That would grieve me full sore
 When I should come to that fearful answer.
 Up, let us go thither together.
 GOODS Nay, not so, I am too brittle, I may not endure.
 425 I will follow no man on foot, be ye sure.
 EVERYMAN Alas, I have thee loved and had great
 pleasure
 All my life-days on good and treasure.
 GOODS That is to thy damnation, without leasing,^o
 For my love is contrary to the love everlasting.
 430 But if thou had me loved moderately during,^o
 As to the poor to give part of me,
 Then shouldest thou not in this dolor be,
 Nor in this great sorrow and care.
 EVERYMAN Lo, now was I deceived ere I was ware,
 435 And all I may wite^o misspending of time.
 GOODS What, weenest^o thou that I am thine?
 EVERYMAN I had weened so.
 GOODS Nay, Everyman, I say no.
 As for a while I was lent thee;
 440 A season thou hast had me in prosperity.
 My condition^o is man's soul to kill;
 If I save one, a thousand I do spill.^o
 Weenest thou that I will follow thee?
 Nay, from this world, not verily.
 445 EVERYMAN I had weened otherwise.

GOODS Therefore to thy soul Good is a thief;
For when thou art dead, this is my guise^o—
Another to deceive in the same wise
As I have done thee, and all to his soul's reproof.^o
450 EVERYMAN O false Good, cursed thou be,
Thou traitor to God, that hast deceived me
And caught me in thy snare!
GOODS Marry, thou brought thyself in care,^o
Whereof I am glad:
455 I must needs laugh, I cannot be sad.
EVERYMAN Ah, Good, thou hast had long my heartily^o
love;
I gave thee that which should be the Lord's above.
But wilt thou not go with me, indeed?
I pray thee truth to say.
460 GOODS No, so God me speed!
Therefore farewell and have good day.

[*Exit* GOODS.]

EVERYMAN Oh, to whom shall I make my moan
For to go with me in that heavy^o journey?
First Fellowship said he would with me gone:^o
465 His words were very pleasant and gay,
But afterward he left me alone.
Then spake I to my kinsmen, all in despair,
And also they gave me words fair—
They lacked no fair speaking,
470 But all forsake me in the ending.
Then went I to my Goods that I loved best,
In hope to have comfort; but there had I least,
For my Goods sharply did me tell
That he bringeth many into hell.
475 Then of myself I was ashamed,
And so I am worthy to be blamed:
Thus may I well myself hate.

Of whom shall I now counsel take?
I think that I shall never speed^o
480 Till that I go to my Good Deed.
But alas, she is so weak
That she can neither go^o nor speak.
Yet will I venture^o on her now.
My Good Deeds, where be you?
485 GOOD DEEDS [*speaking from the ground*] Here I lie,
cold in the ground:
Thy sins hath me sore bound
That I cannot stear.^o
EVERYMAN O Good Deeds, I stand in fear:
I must you pray of counsel,
490 For help now should come right well.
GOOD DEEDS Everyman, I have understanding
That ye be summoned, account to make,
Before Messiah of Jer'salem King.
And you do by me,³ that journey with you will I take.
495 EVERYMAN Therefore I come to you my moan to make:
I pray you that ye will go with me.
GOOD DEEDS I would full fain,^o but I cannot stand,
verily.
EVERYMAN Why, is there anything on you fall?^o
GOOD DEEDS Yea, sir, I may thank you of all:
500 If ye had perfectly cheered me,
Your book of count full ready had be.

[GOOD DEEDS *shows him the account book.*]

Look, the books of your works and deeds eke,^o
As how they lie under the feet,
To your soul's heaviness.^o
505 EVERYMAN Our Lord Jesus help me!
For one letter here I cannot see.
GOOD DEEDS There is a blind^o reckoning in time of
distress!

EVERYMAN Good Deeds, I pray you help me in this
need,
Or else I am forever damned indeed.
510 Therefore help me to make reckoning
Before the Redeemer of all thing
That King is and was and ever shall.
GOOD DEEDS Everyman, I am sorry of^o your fall
And fain would help you and^o I were able.
515 EVERYMAN Good Deeds, your counsel I pray you give
me.
GOOD DEEDS That shall I do verily,
Though that on my feet I may not go;
I have a sister that shall with you also,
520 Called Knowledge, which shall with you abide
To help you to make that dreadful reckoning.

[*Enter* KNOWLEDGE.]

KNOWLEDGE Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy
guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side.
EVERYMAN In good condition I am now in everything,
And am whole content with this good thing,
525 Thanked be God my Creator.
GOOD DEEDS And when she hath brought you there
Where thou shalt heal thee of thy smart,^o
Then go you with your reckoning and your Good
Deeds together
For to make you joyful at heart
530 Before the blessed Trinity.
EVERYMAN My Good Deeds, gramercy!^o
I am well content, certainly,
With your words sweet.
KNOWLEDGE Now go we together lovingly
535 To Confession, that cleansing river.
EVERYMAN For joy I weep—I would we were there!

But I pray you give me cognition,^o
Where dwelleth that holy man Confession?
540 KNOWLEDGE In the House of Salvation:
We shall us comfort, by God's grace.

[KNOWLEDGE *leads* EVERYMAN *to* CONFESSION.]

Lo, this is Confession: kneel down and ask mercy,
For he is in good conceit^o with God Almighty.
EVERYMAN [*kneeling*] O glorious fountain that all
uncleanness doth clarify,^o
545 Wash from me the spots of vice unclean,
That on me no sin may be seen.⁴
I come with Knowledge for my redemption,
Redempt^o with heart and full contrition,
For I am commanded a pilgrimage to take
And great accounts before God to make.
550 Now I pray you, Shrift,^o mother of Salvation,
Help my Good Deeds for my piteous exclamation.
CONFESSION I know your sorrow well, Everyman:
Because with Knowledge ye come to me,
I will you comfort as well as I can,
555 And a precious jewel I will give thee,
Called Penance, voider^o of adversity.
Therewith shall your body chastised be—
With abstinence and perseverance in God's service.
Here shall you receive that scourge of me,
560 Which is penance strong^o that ye must endure,
To remember thy Saviour was scourged for thee
With sharp scourges,⁵ and suffered it patiently.
So must thou ere thou 'scape that painful pilgrimage.
Knowledge, keep^o him in this voyage,
565 And by that time Good Deeds will be with thee.
But in any wise be secure^o of mercy—
For your time draweth fast—and ye will saved be.
Ask God mercy and he will grant, truly.

570 When with the scourge of penance man doth him^o
 bind,
 The oil of forgiveness then shall he find.
 EVERYMAN Thanked be God for his gracious work,
 For now I will my penance begin.
 This hath rejoiced and lighted my heart,
 Though the knots be painful and hard within.⁶
 575 KNOWLEDGE Everyman, look your penance that ye
 fulfill,
 What pain that ever it to you be;
 And Knowledge shall give you counsel at will
 How your account ye shall make clearly.
 EVERYMAN O eternal God, O heavenly figure,
 580 O way of righteousness, O goodly vision,
 Which descended down in a virgin pure
 Because he would every man redeem,
 Which Adam forfeited by his disobedience;
 O blessed Godhead, elect and high Divine,^o
 585 Forgive my grievous offense!
 Here I cry thee mercy in this presence:
 O ghostly^o Treasure, O Ransomer and Redeemer,
 Of all the world Hope and Conduiter,^o
 Mirror of joy, Founder^o of mercy,
 590 Which enlumineth^o heaven and earth thereby,
 Hear my clamorous complaint, though it late be;
 Receive my prayers, of thy benignity.
 Though I be a sinner most abominable,
 Yet let my name be written in Moses' table.⁷
 595 O Mary, pray to the Maker of all thing
 Me for to help at my ending,
 And save me from the power of my enemy,
 For Death assaileth me strongly.
 And Lady, that I may by mean of thy prayer
 600 Of your Son's glory to be partner—
 By the means of his passion^o I it crave.

I beseech you help my soul to save.
 Knowledge, give me the scourge of penance:
 My flesh therewith shall give acquittance.◊
 605 I will now begin, if God give me grace.
 KNOWLEDGE Everyman, God give you time and space!◊
 Thus I bequeath you in the hands of our Saviour:
 Now may you make your reckoning sure.
 EVERYMAN In the name of the Holy Trinity
 610 My body sore punished shall be:
 Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh!
 Also◊ thou delightest to go gay and fresh,
 And in the way of damnation thou did me bring,
 Therefore suffer now strokes of punishing!
 615 Now of penance I will wade the water clear,
 To save me from purgatory, that sharp fire.
 GOOD DEEDS I thank God, now can I walk and go,
 And am delivered of my sickness and woe.
 Therefore with Everyman I will go, and not spare:
 620 His good works I will help him to declare.
 KNOWLEDGE Now, Everyman, be merry and glad:
 Your Good Deeds cometh now, ye may◊ not be sad.
 Now is your Good Deeds whole and sound,
 Going◊ upright upon the ground.
 625 EVERYMAN My heart is light, and shall be evermore.
 Now will I smite faster than I did before.
 GOOD DEEDS Everyman, pilgrim, my special friend,
 Blessed be thou without end!
 For thee is prepartate◊ the eternal glory.
 630 Ye have me made whole and sound
 Therefore I will bide by thee in every stound.◊8
 EVERYMAN Welcome, my Good Deeds! Now I hear thy
 voice,
 I weep for very sweetness of love.
 KNOWLEDGE Be no more sad, but ever rejoice:
 635 God seeth thy living in his throne above.

Put on this garment to thy behove,^o
Which is wet with your tears—
Or else before God you may it miss
When ye to your journey's end come shall.

640 EVERYMAN Gentle Knowledge, what do ye it call?
KNOWLEDGE It is a garment of sorrow;
From pain it will you borrow:^o
Contrition it is
That getteth forgiveness;
645 It pleaseth God passing^o well.
GOOD DEEDS Everyman, will you wear it for your heal?^o
EVERYMAN Now blessed be Jesu, Mary's son,
For now have I on true contrition.
And let us go now without tarrying.

650 Good Deeds, have we clear our reckoning?
GOOD DEEDS Yea, indeed, I have it here.
EVERYMAN Then I trust we need not fear.
Now friends, let us not part in twain.
KNOWLEDGE Nay, Everyman, that will we not, certain.

655 GOOD DEEDS Yet must thou lead with thee
Three persons of great might.
EVERYMAN Who should they be?
GOOD DEEDS Discretion and Strength they hight,^o
And thy Beauty may not abide behind.

660 KNOWLEDGE Also ye must call to mind
Your Five-Wits^o as for your counselors.
GOOD DEEDS You must have them ready at all hours.
EVERYMAN How shall I get them hither?
KNOWLEDGE You must call them all together,

665 And they will be here incontinent.^o
EVERYMAN My friends, come hither and be present,
Discretion, Strength, my Five-Wits, and Beauty!

[*They enter.*]

BEAUTY Here at your will we be all ready.

What will ye that we should do?
 670 GOOD DEEDS That ye would with Everyman go
 And help him in his pilgrimage.
 Advise you: o will ye with him or not in that voyage?
 STRENGTH We will bring him all thither,
 To his help and comfort, ye may believe me.
 675 DISCRETION So will we go with him all together.
 EVERYMAN Almighty God, loved o might thou be!
 I give thee laud that I have hither brought
 Strength, Discretion, Beauty, and Five-Wits—lack I
 nought—
 And my Good Deeds, with Knowledge clear,
 680 All be in my company at my will here:
 I desire no more to my business.
 STRENGTH And I, Strength, will by you stand in
 distress,
 Though thou would in battle fight on the ground.
 FIVE-WITS And though it were through the world round,
 685 We will not depart for sweet ne sour.
 BEAUTY No more will I, until death's hour,
 Whatsoever thereof befall.
 DISCRETION Everyman, advise you first of all:
 Go with a good advisement o and deliberation.
 690 We all give you virtuous o monition o
 That all shall be well.
 EVERYMAN My friends, hearken what I will tell;
 I pray God reward you in his heaven-sphere;
 Now hearken all that be here,
 695 For I will make my testament,
 Here before you all present:
 In alms half my good o I will give with my hands
 twain,
 In the way of charity with good intent;
 And the other half, still o shall remain,
 700 I 'queath o to be returned there it ought to be.
 This I do in despite of the fiend of hell,

To go quit out of his perel,⁹
 Ever after and this day.
 KNOWLEDGE Everyman, hearken what I say:
 705 Go to Priesthood, I you advise,
 And receive of him, in any wise,^o
 The holy sacrament and ointment^o together;
 Then shortly see ye turn again hither:
 We will all abide you here.
 710 FIVE-WITS Yea, Everyman, hie^o you that ye ready were.
 There is no emperor, king, duke, ne baron,
 That of God hath commission
 As hath the least priest in the world being:
 For of the blessed sacraments pure and bening^o
 715 He beareth the keys, and thereof hath the cure^o
 For man's redemption—it is ever sure—
 Which God for our souls' medicine
 Gave us out of his heart with great pine,^o
 Here in this transitory life for thee and me.
 720 The blessed sacraments seven there be:
 Baptism, confirmation, with priesthood^o good,
 And the sacrament of God's precious flesh and
 blood,
 Marriage, the holy extreme unction, and penance:
 These seven be good to have in remembrance,
 725 Gracious sacraments of high divinity.
 EVERYMAN Fain^o would I receive that holy body,
 And meekly to my ghostly^o father I will go.
 FIVE-WITS Everyman, that is the best that ye can do:
 God will you to salvation bring.
 730 For priesthood exceedeth all other thing:
 To us Holy Scripture they do teach,
 And converteth man from sin, heaven to reach;
 God hath to them more power given
 Than to any angel that is in heaven.
 735 With five words¹ he may consecrate

God's body in flesh and blood to make,
And handleth his Maker between his hands.
The priest bindeth and unbindeth all bands,²
Both in earth and in heaven.
740 Thou ministers^o all the sacraments seven;
Though we kiss thy feet, thou were worthy;
Thou art surgeon that cureth sin deadly;
No remedy we find under God
But all only priesthood.³
745 Everyman, God gave priests that dignity
And setteth them in his stead among us to be.
Thus be they above angels in degree.

[*Exit* EVERYMAN.]

KNOWLEDGE If priests be good, it is so, surely.
But when Jesu hanged on the cross with great
750 smart,^o
There he gave out of his blessed heart
The same sacrament in great torment,
He sold them not to us, that Lord omnipotent:
Therefore Saint Peter the Apostle doth say
That Jesu's curse hath all they
755 Which God their Saviour do buy or sell,⁴
Or they for any money do take or tell.⁵
Sinful priests giveth the sinners example bad:
Their children sitteth by other men's fires, I have
heard;
And some haunteth^o women's company
760 With unclean life, as lusts of lechery.
These be with sin made blind.
FIVE-WITS I trust to God no such may we find.
Therefore let us priesthood honor,
And follow their doctrine for our souls' succor.
765 We be their sheep and they shepherds be

By whom we all be kept in surety.
Peace, for yonder I see Everyman come,
Which hath made true satisfaction.
GOOD DEEDS Methink it is he indeed.

770

[*Re-enter* EVERYMAN.]

EVERYMAN Now Jesu be your alder speed!⁶
I have received the sacrament for my redemption,
And then mine extreme unction.
Blessed be all they that counseled me to take it!
And now, friends, let us go without longer respite.
775 I thank God that ye have tarried so long.
Now set each of you on this rood^o your hond
And shortly follow me:
I go before there^o I would be. God be our guide!

775

STRENGTH Everyman, we will not from you go
775 Till ye have done this voyage long.

DISCRETION I, Discretion, will bide by you also.

KNOWLEDGE And though this pilgrimage be never so
strong,^o

I will never part you fro.

STRENGTH Everyman, I will be as sure by thee
785 As ever I did by Judas Maccabee.⁷

785

EVERYMAN Alas, I am so faint I may not stand—
My limbs under me doth fold!

Friends, let us not turn again to this land,
Not for all the world's gold.

790

For into this cave must I creep
And turn to earth, and there to sleep.

BEAUTY What, into this grave, alas?

EVERYMAN Yea, there shall ye consume,^o more and
lass.⁸

BEAUTY And what, should I smother here?

795

EVERYMAN Yea, by my faith, and nevermore appear.
In this world live no more we shall,

But in heaven before the highest Lord of all.

BEAUTY I cross out all this! Adieu, by Saint John—

800 I take my tape in my lap and am gone.⁹

EVERYMAN What, Beauty, whither will ye?

BEAUTY Peace, I am deaf—I look not behind me,
Not and thou wouldest give me all the gold in thy
chest.

[*Exit* BEAUTY.]

EVERYMAN Alas, whereto may I trust?

805 Beauty goeth fast away fro me—
She promised with me to live and die!

STRENGTH Everyman, I will thee also forsake and deny.
Thy game liketh^o me not at all.

EVERYMAN Why then, ye will forsake me all?
Sweet Strength, tarry a little space.

810 STRENGTH Nay, sir, by the rood of grace,
I will hie me from thee fast,
Though thou weep till thy heart tobrast.^o

EVERYMAN Ye would ever bide by me, ye said.

815 STRENGTH Yea, I have you far enough conveyed!^o
Ye be old enough, I understand,
Your pilgrimage to take on hand:
I repent me that I hither came.

EVERYMAN Strength, you to displease I am to blame,¹
Yet promise is debt, this ye well wot.^o

820 STRENGTH In faith, I care not:
Thou art but a fool to complain;
You spend your speech and waste your brain.
Go, thrust thee into the ground.

[*Exit* STRENGTH.]

825 EVERYMAN I had weened^o surer I should you have
found.

He that trusteth in his Strength
She him deceiveth at the length.
Both Strength and Beauty forsaketh me—
Yet they promised me fair and lovingly.
830 DISCRETION Everyman, I will after Strength be gone:
As for me, I will leave you alone.
EVERYMAN Why Discretion, will ye forsake me?
DISCRETION Yea, in faith, I will go from thee.
For when Strength goeth before,
I follow after evermore.
835 EVERYMAN Yet I pray thee, for the love of the Trinity,
Look in my grave once piteously.
DISCRETION Nay, so nigh will I not come.
Farewell everyone!

[*Exit* DISCRETION.]

EVERYMAN O all thing faileth save God alone—
840 Beauty, Strength, and Discretion.
For when Death bloweth his blast
They all run fro me full fast.
FIVE-WITS Everyman, my leave now of thee I take.
I will follow the other, for here I thee forsake.
845 EVERYMAN Alas, then may I wail and weep,
For I took you for my best friend.
FIVE-WITS I will no longer thee keep.°
Now farewell, and there an end!

[*Exit* FIVE-WITS.]

EVERYMAN O Jesu, help, all hath forsaken me!
850 GOOD DEEDS Nay, Everyman, I will bide with thee:
I will not forsake thee indeed;
Thou shalt find me a good friend at need.
EVERYMAN Gramercy, Good Deeds! Now may I true
friends see.

855 They have forsaken me every one—
I loved them better than my Good Deeds alone.
Knowledge, will ye forsake me also?
KNOWLEDGE Yea, Everyman, when ye to Death shall go,
But not yet, for no manner of danger.
EVERYMAN Gramercy, Knowledge, with all my heart!
860 KNOWLEDGE Nay, yet will I not from hence depart
Till I see where ye shall be come.²
EVERYMAN Methink, alas, that I must be gone
To make my reckoning and my debts pay,
For I see my time is nigh spent away.
865 Take example, all ye that this do hear or see,
How they that I best loved do forsake me,
Except my Good Deeds that bideth truly.
GOOD DEEDS All earthly things is but vanity.
Beauty, Strength, and Discretion do man forsake,
870 Foolish friends and kinsmen that fair spake—
All fleeth save Good Deeds, and that am I.
EVERYMAN Have mercy on me, God most mighty,
And stand by me, thou mother and maid, holy Mary!
GOOD DEEDS Fear not: I will speak for thee.
875 EVERYMAN Here I cry God mercy!
GOOD DEEDS Short our end, and 'minish our pain.³
Let us go, and never come again.
EVERYMAN Into thy hands, Lord, my soul I commend:
Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost.
880 As thou me boughtest,^o so me defend,
And save me from the fiend's boast,
That I may appear with that blessed host
That shall be saved at the day of doom.
In manus tuas, of mights most,
885 *Forever commendo spiritum meum.*⁴

[EVERYMAN *and* GOOD DEEDS *descend into the grave.*]

KNOWLEDGE Now hath he suffered that we all shall
endure,
The Good Deeds shall make all sure.
Now hath he made ending,
Methinketh that I hear angels sing
890 And make great joy and melody
Where Everyman's soul received shall be.
ANGEL [*within*] Come, excellent elect^o spouse to Jesu!⁵
Here above thou shalt go
Because of thy singular virtue.
895 Now the soul is taken the body fro,
Thy reckoning is crystal clear:
Now shalt thou into the heavenly sphere—
Unto the which all ye shall come
That liveth well before the day of doom.
900

[*Enter* DOCTOR.]⁶

DOCTOR This memorial^o men may have in mind:
Ye hearers, take it of worth,^o old and young,
And forsake Pride, for he deceiveth you in the end.
And remember Beauty, Five-Wits, Strength, and
Discretion,
905 They all at the last do Everyman forsake,
Save his Good Deeds there doth he take—
But beware, for and^o they be small,
Before God he hath no help at all—
None excuse may be there for Everyman.
Alas, how shall he do than?^o
910 For after death amends may no man make,
For then mercy and pity doth him forsake.
If his reckoning be not clear when he doth come,
God will say, "*Ite, maledicti, in ignem eternum!*"⁷
And he that hath his account whole and sound,
915 High in heaven he shall be crowned,
Unto which place God bring us all thither,

That we may live body and soul together.
 Thereto help, the Trinity!
 Amen, say ye, for saint^o charity.

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text is based on the earliest printing of the play (no manuscript is known) by John Skot about 1530, as reproduced by W. W. Greg (1904). The spelling has been modernized except where modernization would spoil the rhyme, and modern punctuation has been added. The stage directions have been amplified.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, the two thieves between whom Christ was crucified.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The other three deadly sins are envy, gluttony, and sloth.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, let's get started at once.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, none to appear in your stead.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That fears nobody.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: I care nothing for.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: If I might have a delay for just twelve years.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Naturally. See Romans 5:12.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See Luke 12:19–20.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In thy life.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Or frequent the lusty company of women.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: An appeal to the Virgin Mary.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: For kinship will creep where it cannot walk (that is, kinsmen will suffer hardship for one another).[Return to](#)

[reference 6](#)

- Note 7: That is, for a man may make demands of his kinsmen.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, Satan lies in ambush for me.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, rather fast on.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: To go gadding about.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See John 16:33.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, if you do what I say.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Zechariah 13:1.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See John 19:1.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, to my senses. "Knots": the knots on the scourge (whip) of penance.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Here, the tablet on which are recorded those who have been baptized and have done penance.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In order to go free of danger from him.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The five words, *hoc est enim corpus meum* ("For this is my body"; Latin), spoken by the priest when he offers the wafer at communion.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A reference to the power of the keys, inherited by the priesthood from St. Peter, who received it from Christ (Matthew 16:19) with the promise that whatever St. Peter bound or loosed on earth would be bound or loosed in heaven.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Except from priesthood alone.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: To give or receive money for the sacraments is simony, named after Simon, who wished to buy the gift of the Holy Ghost and was cursed by St. Peter. See Acts 8:20.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Or who, for any sacrament, take or count out money.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The prosperer of you all.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Judas Maccabaeus (d. ca. 160 B.C.E.), Jewish leader who successfully led the resistance to Syrian efforts to impose Greek culture on Judaea; see 1 Maccabees.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: More and less (that is, all of you).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: I tuck my skirts in my belt and am off.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: I'm to blame for displeasing you.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Till I see where you will come to.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, make our dying quick and diminish our pain.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Into your hands, O greatest of powers, I commend my spirit forever (Latin). See Christ's dying words (Luke 23:46).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The soul is often referred to as the bride of Jesus.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The Doctor is the learned theologian who explains the meaning of the play.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire (Latin; Matthew 25:41).[Return to reference 7](#)

Notes

- °: *hearing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *respect*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in form*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *always*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thoughtless*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *allowed myself to die*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *avarice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *degenerates*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *if*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chosen*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abased*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *for* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sincerely* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *encumbered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *everywhere* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *separate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forgotten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *request* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unexpected* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *understanding* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accounts* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrest* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goods* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *test* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hasten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suppose* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *senses* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preparation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *warning* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guard* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ledger* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *been begotten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gone by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trust* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many thanks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straw* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *disclose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *repay* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strict* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accounting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frighten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jokes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loathsome*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *escort me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *commend*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *part*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *before this*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aid*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *assay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whether*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much thanks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strict*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *born*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *entice*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *wanton*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *true bent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to this*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *glad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *God*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *now and then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *illegible*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the meanwhile*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blame on*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suppose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disposition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ruin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *custom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shame*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sincere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorrowful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *walk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gamble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stir*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gladly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fallen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *distress*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *an illegible*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *pain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thanks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knowledge*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *esteem*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purify*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *redeemed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confession*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expeller*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harsh*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *himself*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *divinity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *guide*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Founder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lights up*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *satisfaction for sins*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *opportunity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *prepared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trial*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *redeem*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *surpassingly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *welfare*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *are called*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *senses*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *take thought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *praised*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *preparation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confident* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *prediction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *which still*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bequeath*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at all costs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *extreme unction*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *haste*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *benign*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *administers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frequent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cross*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harsh*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *escorted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *watch over*[Return to reference](#) °
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- °: *chosen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reminder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prize it*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy*[Return to reference](#) °

WHAT THE ANIMALS SAY

Literature written in Britain between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries is crowded with animals. Of course writers of encyclopedias and moralists also focused on animals as sources of knowledge about the natural world and ethical instruction for humans, respectively. Literary animals, by contrast, tell us something very different—much funnier, more skeptical, and more daring.

Works of medieval literature tell us little of serious interest about the reality of the natural world, and for the most part they do not pretend to. Though often zoologically implausible, many works of literature about animals superficially seem to use animals in the same way moralists use them: as prompts to ideal ethical behavior for humans. In fact, however, animal literature points to an ethics that tends to be much more daring than that of the moralists, as it deals much more candidly with the powerful challenges humans face as they attempt to live ethically. The animal literature openly confesses, for example, that humans experience sexual desire, that many of us eat other animals, and that we are likely to ignore ethical advice when we are hungry. The literature frankly recognizes, that is, that we too are animals.

In addition to making adventurous forays into ethics, animal literature also prompts us to think about politics. The need for collective action is all the more urgent and all the more difficult to achieve when considered through the lens of the animal “kingdom.” Much late medieval animal literature is less about animals than about us; it uses animals to think with, and the thoughts it thinks are daring and often refreshing, if sometimes uncomfortable.

Above all, animals in late medieval animal literature talk. When they talk, they obviously blur the boundary between animals and humans, emphasizing that talking animals point to linguistically gifted human counterparts. Thus animal literature tends, paradoxically perhaps, to focus with especial sophistication on

linguistic issues: *The Owl and the Nightingale* (1189–1216) is as much, if not more, interested in *how* to debate as it is in the content of debate; in Robert Henryson's "The Cock and the Jasper" (ca. 1470s) the cock deploys a beautifully crafted rhetoric to disown rhetorical skill; the Swallow in Henryson's "Preaching of the Swallow" (ca. 1470s) subtly deploys university learning to reveal its inability to persuade; Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* (1390s; see [pp. 556–70](#)) challenges the reader to interpret the fable persuasively.

Yet precisely as these animals speak in specifically human ways, authors will take care to remind readers that the speakers are animals, that humans are animals too, and that, therefore, humans may have no stronger claims to elevated philosophical, ethical, and political discourse than do animals. The same vulnerability attends the rhetorically elevated ways in which narrators describe animal action: if it is ridiculous to describe animals as exemplary of higher human aspirations, then maybe the description is no less ridiculous when applied to humans.

The main genre of medieval literary animal story is that of the animal fable. Animal fables, which trace their origin to Aesop (ca. sixth century B.C.E.), are small narratives in which animals act and speak, usually concluding with a sentence-long moral tacked on. They involve many animals, such as frogs, mice, lambs, foxes, birds, wolves, and lions. In later contexts, such stories were used to teach schoolboys both Latin and some commonsense morality (for example, don't overeat; don't overreach; save up for the hard times; justice can be rough and ready, so keep clear of the predators). In the hands of great literary artists such as Chaucer and Henryson, however, these narratives express mordant comedy and truths whose force extends well beyond the elementary classroom.

Beast epic is a much later offshoot from the ancient animal fable tradition. It appears in Europe for the first time in the tenth century in Latin, and in the twelfth century in vernacular languages. Beast epics are groups of interconnected narratives, set in the court of the lion; their single (anti-)hero is Reynard the Fox. They present narratives of dark but vital humor that repeat the same story with

many variations: the rhetorically brilliant fox Reynard almost always outwits all comers by manipulating their greed or vanity. No matter how tight the corner into which Reynard has been backed, we know he'll escape through brilliant narrative control and intimate, intuitive knowledge of his enemies' weaknesses. He exposes not just the arrogance of the greedy but also, and even more damagingly, the hypocrisy of the "civilized" order. Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* is excerpted from larger narratives of this kind, even if the fox in that tale is foiled in his scheme.

Late medieval writers reach for animals in many other genres, too. *The Owl and the Nightingale* belongs to a long medieval tradition of debate poetry, while Chaucer's *Parliament of Birds* (1370s) draws on a great late medieval tradition of Neoplatonic philosophical poetry. This tradition attempted to express the ecological balance of the cosmos, placing the microcosm of humans within the macrocosm of the natural world and planets. Though humans were definitely at the center of that vision, they were in no way conceived as transcendent above the natural world: in order to understand ourselves, these texts tell us, humans need to understand how we are a compact amalgam of the forces and matter that govern the universe. Humans, like the rest of nature, participate in the tense balance of the natural energies that constitute natural systems. We can understand nature because we are made of the same stuff, but for that reason we are dangerously prone to place appetite above understanding. Animals naturally figure powerfully in philosophical Latin fictions such as Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia* (1140s) and Alan of Lille's *Complaint of Nature* (1160s). Vernacular poems such as Chaucer's *Parliament of Birds* rework and question this Latin tradition.

In all the traditions so far considered, humans are humans and animals are animals, even if they are talking animals. Medieval literature also has examples of interspecies crossing, of humans provisionally and painfully locked into animal form. Derived ultimately from the tradition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (before 8 C.E.), these stories are said to be taken from folk culture and the cultural

margins, thereby permitting weird, unscientific, but wonderfully penetrating accounts of human/animal overlaps. Because they merge animal and human, they permit and provoke reflection across the species divide: what might it be like to be an animal? Marie de France's lay *Bisclavret* (late twelfth century) is an especially rich example of this genre.

All these traditions involve narrative and literary surprises, not to say shocks. Animals fail to observe the rules of social or literary decorum that govern human actors. These surprises can be amusing or dark, but they are always revealing about the full scope of what it is to be human.

MARIE DE FRANCE

For the full headnote on Marie de France (fl. ca. 1180), see [page 159](#). The Germanic term *werewolf* (in this tale “garwaf”; line 4) is a compound word with two equally balanced, juxtaposed elements: “gar”—derived from “wer,” meaning “man”—and “wolf.” Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* tests the degree to which these species categories are indeed balanced, by telling a story derived from the ancient belief in lycanthropy (the transformation of a human into a wolf). Romances (see [pp. 141–42](#)) always involve a movement from civilization to a wild place, and from the wild back to a reformed, strengthened civilization. The wisdom embedded in that narrative structure is that civilization is not a unitary concept; on the contrary, for the civilized order to maintain its balance, it must have commerce with all that threatens it. In testing that claim, romances occasionally involve a species shift from human to animal.

Bisclavret not only involves that shift but does so at an extreme limit: the human morphs into one of the most brutal and savage of animals, the wolf. *Bisclavret* therefore puts the binary civilizational claim of romance narrative to the test. Can the human survive transformation into wolf? Or, even further, must the human have commerce with its wolf counterpart to maintain its balance? Binary romance narratives, always moving between tame and wild, express and disguise a shameful secret: civilization *needs* the wild. While the story structure might pretend otherwise, as it returns the protagonist to, and reconfirms the values of, civilization at its end, it has secretly confessed civilization’s dependence on the wild. In this story, the husband clearly needs to be a wolf, for three whole days a week. His marriage is stable as long as this need is not articulated by the couple. Once articulated, the structure of the marriage collapses, since the wife wants nothing to do with the man-wolf and repudiates him.

One might expect a savage, civilization-destroying narrative from here on. And indeed, that expectation is in part confirmed: the wolf is condemned to his wild state, twice he attacks humans, and he is twice on the point of being torn apart as a wild animal. But savagery is not the whole story: the wolf “speaks,” his attacks are targeted, and he otherwise observes court propriety with extreme delicacy. Even when he can retrieve his human form by donning his clothes, he refuses to do so in public. Through his wildness he prompts the mechanisms of human justice. Sometimes the bad manners of a wolf attack in the court itself are necessary to prompt justice. That is one way of reading *Bisclavret*, from the wolf-man’s perspective. From that angle, however, structures of heterosexual marriage turn out to be disposable. The wife is attacked and tortured: she ends up banished, without a nose, and becomes the ancestor of noseless offspring. The husband ends up kissing and hugging the king in the king’s bed. “Civilization,” “justice,” and “human,” then, turn out to have somewhat more restricted referents in this story by a woman author.

Bisclavret¹

Since I am undertaking to compose *lais*,
I don't want to forget Bisclavret;
In Bréton, the *lai's* name is *Bisclavret*—
the Normans call it *Garwaf*²
5 In the old days, people used to say—
and it often actually happened—
that some men turned into werewolves
and lived in the woods.
A werewolf is a savage beast;
while his fury is on him
10 he eats men, does much harm,
goes deep in the forest to live.
But that's enough of this for now:
I want to tell you about the Bisclavret.

15 In Brittany there lived a nobleman
whom I've heard marvelously praised;
a fine, handsome knight
who behaved nobly.
He was close to his lord,
and loved by all his neighbors.
20 He had an estimable wife,
one of lovely appearance;
he loved her and she him,
but one thing was very vexing to her:
during the week he would be missing
25 for three whole days, and she didn't know
what happened to him or where he went.
Nor did any of his men know anything about it.
One day he returned home
happy and delighted;

she asked him about it.
30 "My lord," she said, "and dear love,
I'd very much like to ask you one thing—
if I dared;
but I'm so afraid of your anger
35 that nothing frightens me more."
When he heard that, he embraced her,
drew her to him and kissed her.
"My lady," he said, "go ahead and ask!
There's nothing you could want to know,
40 that, if I knew the answer, I wouldn't tell you."
"By God," she replied, "now I'm cured!
My lord, on the days when you go away from me
I'm in such a state—
so sad at heart,
45 so afraid I'll lose you—
that if I don't get quick relief
I could die of this very soon.
Please, tell me where you go,
where you have been staying.
50 I think you must have a lover,
and if that's so, you're doing wrong."
"My dear," he said, "have mercy on me, for God's
sake!
Harm will come to me if I tell you about this,
because I'd lose your love
55 and even my very self."
When the lady heard this
she didn't take it lightly;
she kept asking him,
coaxed and flattered him so much,
60 that he finally told her what happened to him—
he hid nothing from her.
"My dear, I become a werewolf:
I go off into the great forest,
in the thickest part of the woods,

65 and I live on the prey I hunt down."
When he had told her everything,
she asked further
whether he undressed or kept his clothes on.³
"Wife," he replied, "I go stark naked."
70 "Tell me, then, for God's sake, where your clothes
are."
"That I won't tell you;
for if I were to lose them,
and then be discovered,
I'd stay a werewolf forever.
75 I'd be helpless
until I got them back.
That's why I don't want their hiding place to be
known."
"My lord," the lady answered,
"I love you more than all the world;
80 you mustn't hide anything from me
or fear me in any way:
that doesn't seem like love to me.
What wrong have I done? For what sin of mine
do you mistrust me about anything?
85 Do the right thing and tell me!"
She harassed and bedeviled him so,
that he had no choice but to tell her.
"Lady," he said, "near the woods,
beside the road that I use to get there,
90 there's an old chapel
that has often done me good service;
under a bush there is a big stone,
hollowed out inside;
I hide my clothes right there
90 until I'm ready to come home."
The lady heard this wonder
and turned scarlet from fear;

she was terrified of the whole adventure.
Over and over she considered
100 how she might get rid of him;
she never wanted to sleep with him again.
There was a knight of that region
who had loved her for a long time,
who begged for her love,
105 and dedicated himself to serving her.
She'd never loved him at all,
nor pledged her love to him,
but now she sent a messenger for him,
and told him her intention.
110 "My dear," she said, "cheer up!
I shall now grant you without delay
what you have suffered for;
you'll meet with no more refusals—
I offer you my love and my body;
115 make me your mistress!"
He thanked her graciously
and accepted her promise,
and she bound him to her by an oath.
Then she told him
120 how her husband went away and what happened to
him;
she also taught him the precise path
her husband took into the forest,
and then she sent the knight to get her husband's
clothes.
So Bisclavret was betrayed,
125 ruined by his own wife.
Since people knew he was often away from home
they all thought
this time he'd gone away forever.
They searched for him and made inquiries
130 but could never find him,
so they had to let matters stand.

The wife later married the other knight,
who had loved her for so long.

135 A whole year passed
until one day the king went hunting;
he headed right for the forest
where Bisclavret was.
When the hounds were unleashed,
140 they ran across Bisclavret;
the hunters and the dogs
chased him all day,
until they were just about to take him
and tear him apart,
145 at which point he saw the king
and ran to him, pleading for mercy.
He took hold of the king's stirrup,
kissed his leg and his foot.
The king saw this and was terrified;
he called his companions.
150 "My lords," he said, "come quickly!
Look at this marvel—
this beast is humbling itself to me.
It has the mind of a man, and it's begging me for
mercy!
155 Chase the dogs away,
and make sure no one strikes it.
This beast is rational—he has a mind.
Hurry up: let's get out of here.
I'll extend my peace to the creature;
indeed, I'll hunt no more today!"
160 Thereupon the king turned away.
Bisclavret followed him;
he stayed close to the king, and wouldn't go away;
he'd no intention of leaving him.
165 The king led him to his castle;
he was delighted with this turn of events,
for he'd never seen anything like it.

He considered the beast a great wonder
and held him very dear.
He commanded all his followers,
170 for the sake of their love for him, to guard Bisclavret
well,
and under no circumstances to do him harm;
none of them should strike him;
rather, he should be well fed and watered.
They willingly guarded the creature;
175 every day he went to sleep
among the knights, near the king.
Everyone was fond of him;
he was so noble and well behaved
that he never wished to do anything wrong.
180 Regardless of where the king might go,
Bisclavret never wanted to be separated from him;
he always accompanied the king.
The king became very much aware that the creature
loved him.
Now listen to what happened next.
185 The king held a court;
to help him celebrate his feast
and to serve him as handsomely as possible,
he summoned all the barons
who held fiefs from him.
190 Among the knights who went,
and all dressed up in his best attire,
was the one who had married Bisclavret's wife.
He neither knew nor suspected
that he would find Bisclavret so close by.
195 As soon as he came to the palace
Bisclavret saw him,
ran toward him at full speed,
sank his teeth into him, and started to drag him
down.
He would have done him great damage

200 if the king hadn't called him off,
and threatened him with a stick.
Twice that day he tried to bite the knight.
Everyone was extremely surprised,
205 since the beast had never acted that way
toward any other man he had seen.
All over the palace people said
that he wouldn't act that way without a reason:
that somehow or other, the knight had mistreated
Bisclavret,
and now he wanted his revenge.
210 And so the matter rested
until the feast was over
and until the barons took their leave of the king
and started home.
The very first to leave,
215 to the best of my knowledge,
was the knight whom Bisclavret had attacked.
It's no wonder the creature hated him.
Not long afterward,
as the story leads me to believe,
220 the king, who was so wise and noble,
went back to the forest
where he had found Bisclavret,
and the creature went with him.
That night, when he finished hunting,
225 he sought lodging out in the countryside.
The wife of Bisclavret heard about it,
dressed herself elegantly,
and went the next day to speak with the king,
bringing rich presents for him.
230 When Bisclavret saw her coming,
no one could hold him back;
he ran toward her in a rage.
Now listen to how well he avenged himself!
He tore the nose off her face.

235 What worse thing could he have done to her?
Now men closed in on him from all sides;
they were about to tear him apart,
when a wise man said to the king,
240 "My lord, listen to me!
This beast has stayed with you,
and there's not one of us
who hasn't watched him closely,
hasn't traveled with him often.
He's never touched anyone,
245 or shown any wickedness,
except to this woman.
By the faith that I owe you,
he has some grudge against her,
and against her husband as well.
250 This is the wife of the knight
whom you used to like so much,
and who's been missing for so long—
we don't know what became of him.
Why not put this woman to torture
255 and see if she'll tell you
why the beast hates her?
Make her tell what she knows!
We've seen many strange things
happen in Brittany!"
260 The king took his advice;
he detained the knight.
At the same time he took the wife
and subjected her to torture;
out of fear and pain
265 she told all about her husband:
how she had betrayed him
and taken away his clothes;
the story he had told her
about what happened to him and where he went;
270 and how after she had taken his clothes

he'd never been seen in his land again.
She was quite certain
that this beast was Bisclavret.
The king demanded the clothes;
275 whether she wanted to or not
she sent home for them,
and had them brought to Bisclavret.
When they were put down in front of him
he didn't even seem to notice them;
280 the king's wise man—
the one who had advised him earlier—
said to him, "My lord, you're not doing it right.
This beast wouldn't, under any circumstances,
in order to get rid of his animal form,
285 put on his clothes in front of you;
you don't understand what this means:
he's just too ashamed to do it here.
Have him led to your chambers
and bring the clothes with him;
290 then we'll leave him alone for a while.
If he turns into a man, we'll know about it."
The king himself led the way
and closed all the doors on him.
After a while he went back,
295 taking two barons with him;
all three entered the king's chamber.
On the king's royal bed
they found the knight asleep.
The king ran to embrace him.
300 He hugged and kissed him again and again.
As soon as he had the chance,
the king gave him back all his lands;
he gave him more than I can tell.
He banished the wife,
305 chased her out of the country.
She went into exile with the knight

with whom she had betrayed her lord.
She had several children
310 who were widely known
for their appearance:
several women of the family
were actually born without noses,
and lived out their lives noseless.

315 The adventure that you have heard
really happened, no doubt about it.
The *lai* of Bisclavret was made
so it would be remembered forever.

Endnotes

- Note 1: *The Werewolf*. This translation is by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie de France* (1978). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Werewolf. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, when he became a werewolf. [Return to reference 3](#)

THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE

The Owl and the Nightingale is a brilliant yet largely ignored debate poem, probably from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. The date of the poem turns on the identity of "King Henry," referred to in line 1092 as dead. This is most probably King Henry II (d. 1189), rather than Henry III (1216–1272). The poem is therefore most probably written 1189–1216.

The poem's brilliance consists in pitting against each other two female voices, that of a sophisticated, courtly nightingale and that of a somber, wise owl. These two birds face off directly on a number of fronts, most though not all of which pertain especially to female predicaments in the twelfth century, human or avian (for example, household management; musical skill and effect, both aesthetic and ethical; conduct of amorous affairs; marriage; and spiritual probity).

No victor emerges from the debate, but the whole is both unfailingly lively and highly attentive to the emotional and argumentative strategies of debate itself: the strongest argument will not win unless the debater maintains rhetorical control. The work is also acutely conscious that verbal debate is better for resolving differences than physical violence, into which the birds' debate frequently threatens to tip. Wholly free of authorial moralizing, *The Owl and the Nightingale* addresses its readership without condescension of any kind. The very fact that the poem is written in the vernacular, as well as its subject matter, implies an audience of women. And the poem is often very funny.

The poem consists of 1794 lines, written in four-stress couplets (the verse form adapted from French octosyllabic couplets). The verse is exceptionally energetic, as it captures the live force of vital, speaking, opposed voices.

The debate is presented to us as overheard by the poem's narrator in a field on a summer's day. The fictional situation is similar

to that of *The Canterbury Tales*: a largely passive and wholly nonjudgmental narrator reports oral poetry performed live by nonprofessional yet competitive and gifted individuals. We are not explicitly told the identity of the narrator, and likely author, but the birds themselves give us a strong hint: they twice agree to submit their debate before a trusted arbitrator, one “Master Nicholas of Guilford,” from Portesham in Dorset. That person has not been identified as a historical figure, but we might assume that he is university educated (as his title “master” suggests) and the poem’s author.

Modern readers have ignored the poem for two main reasons. First, written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, it is an outlier and has virtually no surviving literary context, no comparable texts in English that would highlight its excellence within its period and thereby garner it literary attention. Second, its language (a southern English dialect of so-called early Middle English) is difficult; competence in Old English is required to read this poem in the original with any fluency. The translation here is by Simon Armitage, who also produced the translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* used in this anthology.

The three selections here are lines 1–100, 1043–120, and 1511–634. They focus respectively on (1) the setting of the scene for the lively, confrontational debate between the Owl and the Nightingale; (2) the Owl’s attack on, and the Nightingale’s defense of, the Nightingale’s encouragement of an illicit love, making a clear reference to the features of the story told in Marie de France’s *Laüstic* (see above, [pp. 184–86](#)); and (3) the Owl’s extraordinarily daring defense of the sexual infidelity of battered wives, and her sympathy for lonely wives.

From The Owl and the Nightingale^{*}

One summer's day I overheard
a mighty war of words disturb
a peaceful & secluded dale;
between an Owl & Nightingale
5 barbed comments flew, now soft, now loud,
but always heartfelt, wounding, proud.
The birds, both swollen up with anger,
hurled abuse at one another,
taking turns to slate & curse
10 what in the other bird was worst,
with insults being especially strong
when rubbishing the other's song.¹
The Nightingale took up proceedings
from the corner of a clearing,
15 perching on a handsome bough
with blossoms hanging down & round,
beside a densely knotted hedge
entwined with reeds & bright green sedge.
She gloried in that branch; it formed
20 a kind of stage, & she performed
the music of her repertoire
as if she played a pipe or harp,
as if each bright, melodious note
were not the product of a throat.
25 There was, nearby, a tree-stump where
the Owl intoned her hourly prayers,
an ancient ivy-covered bole
the Owl had claimed as her abode.
The Nightingale clapped eyes on her
30 & shot the Owl a filthy glare,

disgusted by that horrid creature's
loathsome, nauseating features.
"Freak, why don't you disappear?
It sickens me to see you here.
Your ugly presence guarantees
35 to throw my fluting out of key.
In fact whenever you turn up
my jaw locks & my heart won't pump.
As for your tuneless yodelling
it makes me want to spit, not sing."
40 The Owl was silent until dusk,
by which time she was on the cusp
of rage, her lungs about to burst
through holding back her angry words,
her heart about to pop. She yowled,
45 "How does my music strike you now?
You tell yourself that I can't sing
but I'm not one for twittering.
You ridicule me & you mock,
snipe from the cover of the copse,
50 but if you flew that branch of yours
I'd make you welcome in my claws
(bring on that day before too long!)
& then you'd sing a different song!"
At which the Nightingale remarked,
55 "As long as I'm alert & sharp
in open ground or on the wing
your menace has a hollow ring.
As long as I keep to the hedge
your words are simply worthless threats.
60 I've seen the ruthless way you rip
those birds who can't escape your grip,
& how you like to sink your pincers
into little larks & finches.
That's why feathered creatures hate you,
65 drive you from their patch, berate you

with their screams & cries, & why
they rise & mob you when you fly,
& why the tiniest of tits
would gladly tear you bit from bit.
70 You really are a gruesome sight
in ways too many to describe:
your neck's too thin, your trunk's too small,
your head is bigger than . . . your all!
Your coal-black eyes are weirdly broad
75 & look like they've been daubed with woad,
& glare as if you'd like to feast
on anyone within your reach.
Your bill is sharp & bent & hard—
a flesh-hook with a buckled barb—
80 that issues—loud & all day long—
some caterwaul you call a song.
You threaten me, & say your feet
will catch & mulch me into meat;
a frog, though, underneath the mill-wheel,
85 surely makes a truer Owl meal?
Snail & mouse & squelchy slug
are more your right & proper grub.
You roost by day & fly by night
which proves that something isn't right.
90 You are repellent & impure,
you & those filthy chicks of yours,
that brood of dirty-looking pests
you're raising in a filthy nest.
They soil the den they're living in
95 until their droppings reach their chins
then stand about as if they're blind,
which brings this truism to mind:
'Accursed be the wretched beast
that makes its toilet where it feeds.' "

100

* * *

The angry Owl was so provoked
her eyes grew wider as she spoke.
1045 "You claim to guard the bower where
the leaves grow & the flowers flare
& couples sleep, that sheltered place
where lovers lie down & embrace.
But once you sang—I know for sure—
outside a marriage suite, to lure
1050 a lady into wicked ways.
To lead her body to disgrace
you sang tunes of a shameful sort
& filled her dreams with carnal thoughts.
His lordship soon became aware;
1055 with lime & every type of snare
he laid his traps to make a catch,
& landing at the window's hatch
you came to justice, being pinned
& fastened firmly by your shins.²
1060 The punishment your crime would bring:
wild horses tore you limb from limb.
So do your worst with maids & wives
by bringing ruin to their lives;
your tongue will prove the very trap
1065 that leaves you floored & in a flap."

The Nightingale, piqued at these words,
would readily have fought with swords
& spears if she had been a man,
but since she had no choice her plan
1070 involved her sharp & clever tongue.
"Who speaks well . . . fights well," goes the song;
she'd wage war with her voice instead.
"To fight well, sing well," Alfred³ said.
"Your talk won't cover me in shame—
1075 his lordship was the one to blame
for being jealous of his wife.

His envy could have cost his life
because his heart began to fail
when she conversed with other males.
1080 He locked her in an inner chamber;
strong & steadfast bounds contained her;
sorry for her anguish there
I felt her pain & pitied her
& kept her cheerful all day long
1085 by filling every hour with song,
a tactic which enraged the knight
who loathed my bones with all his might.
He tried to make his problem mine
but was found guilty of the crime:
1090 on hearing of that man's misdeed
King Henry,⁴ rest in peace, decreed
the sentence must be banishment,
a right & proper punishment
for acts so base & underhand
1095 committed in a good king's land,
whereby a tiny Nightingale
had been dismembered top to tail.
To bring back honor to my race
he wiped the smile from that man's face
1100 & made him pay one hundred pounds
to me. My chicks, now safe & sound,
enjoy their new prosperity
by right, & their security.
And I, avenged of the offence,
1105 speak with a strengthened confidence.
Because of that one incident
my cheerfulness is permanent
& as I please I raise my voice
& no one dares dispute my choice.
1110 But you, you wretch, you ghoulisn ghost,
you can't identify a post

or hollow stump to crouch inside
avoiding those who'd nip your hide.
For youngsters, serfs, & those who farm,
1115 & peasant folk, all mean you harm,
& if they spy you on your perch
they hope to injure you, or worse,
& fill their pockets up with stones
then aim to break your horrid bones."

1120

* * *

The Owl was glad to hear this tale,
because although the Nightingale
had started speaking well enough
her argument had tapered off.
She said, "From what you have described
1515 it's clear your sympathies reside
with girls; they're faultless in your eyes,
therefore you praise them to the skies.
But married women, filled with grief,
all turn to me to seek relief.
1520 It happens time & time again
that married life comes under strain,
because of which the husband strays
& finds some other love to chase,
immorally pursuing her
1525 & tipping out his purse on her,
abandoning his lawful spouse
who occupies their lonely house
in threadbare clothes, among bare walls,
with very little food at all.
1530 And out of terror she has learned
to bite her lip once he's returned,
though like a lunatic he shouts
& bawls & throws his weight about.
All that she does displeases him,
1535

all that she utters teases him,
& when she tries to keep the peace
he's apt to punch her in the teeth.
The man who misbehaves that way
can't fail to send his wife astray.
1540 Because of his abuse at home
she'll seek out pleasures of her own;
she'll cuckold him, of course she will,
but don't say she's responsible.
And yes, it's usually the case
1545 she's well brought-up & fair of face,
so when the husband spends his purse
outside the home the crime seems worse—
the mistress of his love affair
is barely worth one strand of hair
1550 belonging to his spouse. In life
such husbands fail to trust their wives:
no other men must talk to them,
& if they look at other men
or speak with other men politely
1555 husbands think deceit is likely.
Stifled, then, by lock & key,
the wives turn to adultery,
because they're driven to explore
what was anathema before.
1560 A curse on those who whine & whinge
when wives deliver their revenge.
This is the thing that wives complain
to me about; I feel their pain
& sense such overwhelming hurt
1565 I sometimes think my heart will burst.
My eyes are sore with bitter tears;
I pray that Christ our Lord will hear
their prayers so wives might share their beds
with decent, honest men instead.
1570 And now I'll tell you one thing more

that you will have no answer for,
I'll put your logic in a spin
& no reply will save your skin.
1575 So, many merchants, many knights,
will love their wives & treat them right,
& many peasants will do too;
accordingly each wife stays true,
& does her best to serve her lord
1580 both in the bedroom & at board
& eagerly she'll aim to please
with caring words & thoughtful deeds.
The husband travels far & wide
in his endeavors to provide
1585 for them, & when he ups & leaves
the steadfast wife at home will grieve;
she'll sit & sigh when he departs
because a longing fills her heart
&, anxious for her husband's sake,
1590 she'll fret by day then lie awake;
each moment lasts a long, long while,
& every step feels like a mile.
Outside, alone, at night, I keep
a vigil while the world's asleep;
1595 alert to how bereft she is
I sing songs for her benefit,
laments for her unhappiness
expressing just how sad she is,
& for this show of sympathy
she warms to me & welcomes me.
1600 I strive to help such wives because
they seek to plot a noble course.
You've riled my heart to such a stage
it's almost paralyzed with rage
1605 & I can barely speak a word,
but I'll continue, undeterred.
You say that I'm despised by men,

inspire hostility in them;
they threaten me with stones & sticks
then beat & smash my bones to bits
1610 & when all life in me is lost
they hang me from a hedge or post
to scare the magpie & the crow
in acres where the crops are sown.
And so, in truth, by shedding blood
1615 I'm helping out & doing good!
My death brings people benefit
which you find painful to admit,
for once you're shrivelled up & gone
you are no use to anyone.
1620 Why you exist I just don't know
you good-for-nothing so-&-so,
but even when I cease to live
I still have something more to give:
when hunters mount me on a stick
1625 in woods where trees grow dense & thick
I serve my purpose as a lure
for little birds, so I ensure
men have their share of roasted meat
by snaring food they like to eat
1630 You're just as pointless when alert
as when you're lifeless & inert;
why bother bringing up a brood—
alive or dead they do no good."

* * *

Endnotes

- Note *: The translation is by Simon Armitage. [Return to reference *](#)

- Note 1: The large tradition of medieval debate poetry has roots in classical literature; see Virgil, *Eclogues* 3 and 7.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A possible allusion to Marie de France's lay *Laüstic* (see pp. 184–86).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: King of Wessex (ca. 871–99), to whom a surviving collection of proverbs, frequently cited in *The Owl and the Nightingale* as a source of wisdom, is attributed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Most probably Henry II (d. 1189).[Return to reference 4](#)

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

For the full headnote on Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400), see [pages 467–69](#).

Chaucer's *Parliament of Birds* is deeply indebted to two classic texts, but a servant to neither. For in both cases, dreaming, desire, and the birds take over.

Chaucer's narrator starts reading a text by the Roman orator and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), Book 6 of his *Republic* (51 B.C.E.), known in the medieval period as *The Dream of Scipio*. The Latin text relates the dream of the Roman general Scipio (d. 129 B.C.E.), who dreams that his grandfather Scipio Africanus takes him on an astral voyage to understand how service to the state will be rewarded in the afterlife, and how pursuit of sensual desire must be repressed by servants of the state as they pursue the Roman military conquest of North Africa.

Later in the poem, the narrator mentions another Latin philosophical text, the late medieval *Complaint of Nature* (1160s) by Alan of Lille. In this text the goddess Nature, whose gown is splendidly embroidered with images of every species of bird, explains to the narrator why human desire, especially homosexual desire, alone in nature deviates from the ideal, fertile, and productive models of the natural order. Alan's *Complaint* ends with the excommunication of homosexual love.

How are these severe Latin texts received in Chaucer's vernacular poem? They enter the dream world and are there rewritten by the desire of the narrator's dreaming psyche. He enters the walled garden of Nature, there to replay Cicero's "common profit," or political good, as the collective "good" of sexual desire as expressed in Nature's parliament, where birds choose their mates on Valentine's Day. And the birds embroidered on the outer garment of Alan's goddess Nature come to life here, irrepressibly debating, singing,

and quacking their way to a collective, ecological resolution of desire. Whereas Alan's natural order is ideally a hierarchical one ruled by cosmic reason, here the hierarchy is invoked only to be questioned in many ways. The aristocratic birds (revealingly, they are birds of prey) may, for example, be sophisticated in their pursuit of a refined and courtly love, but it's the lower birds who, for all their comic, no-nonsense quacking, are better serving the common profit of Nature's ecological order by choosing their mates with admirable dispatch. And when it comes to advising the young aristocratic female bird about the male lover she should choose among the three offering themselves, Nature refuses to recognize the "natural" hierarchy of birth: "If I were Reason, certes, then would I / Counsel you the royal tercel take" (lines 632–33). With this single subjunctive, Chaucer opens up a significant difference between himself and his Neoplatonic poetic and philosophical frames: passionate love may not be rational, but it *is* natural. And natural love can cross the class boundaries of birth, thereby revealing that those boundaries are not in fact natural at all. In this poem, bonding is a matter of election.

This, then, is an account of a new and largely joyous ecology, with immediate implications for humans and human society. Chaucer's Latin source texts promote cosmic, philosophical reason as expressed by patrician figures; his own vernacular poem takes its cue rather from the parliament (literally "the speaking") of birds of all classes.

The Parliament of Birds¹

5 The life so short, the craft so long to learn,²
Th'assay^o so sharp,^o so hard the conquering,
The dreadful^o joy that always slit so yerne,³
All this mean I by Love,⁴ that my feeling
Astonieth^o with his wonderful working⁵
So sore^o ywis,^o that when I on him think,
Not wot I⁶ well wher^o that I float or sink.

10 For all be^o that I know not love in deed,^o
Ne wot^o how that he quiteth folk their hire,⁷
Yet happeth me^o full ofte in bokes^o read
Of his miracles and his cruel ire;^o
There read I well he will be lord and sire,
I dare not seyn,^o his strokes^o been so sore,
But^o God save such a lord! I can no more.⁸

15 Of usage what for luste what for lore,⁹
On bokes rede I ofte, as I you tolde.
But wherefore that I speak all this? Not yore^o
Ago, it happed^o me for to beholde
Upon a book, was write with lettres olde;
And thereupon a certain thing to learn,
20 The longe day full faste^o I read and yerne.^o

For out of olde felde,^o as men sey,
Cometh all this newe corn^o from year to year;
And out of olde bokes, in good fey,^o
Cometh all this newe science^o that men lere.^o
25 But now to purpose as of this matere¹—
To rede forth so gan me to delite,^o

That all that day me thoughte but a lite.^o₂

30 This book of which I make of mencioun,
Entitled was all thus, as I shall telle,
"Tullius^o of the dream of Scipioun."²₂
Chapitres seven it hadde, of heaven and helle,
And earth, and soules that therein dwelle,
Of whiche, as shortly^o as I can it treat,^o
35 Of his sentence^o I will ye seyn the grete.^o

First telleth it, when Scipion was come
In Afrik,^o how he met Massinisse,
That him for joy in armes hath ynome.^o
Then telleth it their speech and all the blisse^o
40 That was betwix^o them, til the day gan misse;^o
And how his ancestor, African so dear,
Gan in his sleep that night to him appear.

Then telleth it that from a starry place,^o
How African hath him Carthage shewed,^o
And warned him before of all his grace^o
45 And said him,^o what man, lered other
 lewed,^o
That loveth common profit,^o well ythewed,^o
He should unto a blissful place wende,^o
Thereas^o joy is that last withouten ende.

50 Then asked he, if folk that now ben dead
Have life and dwelling in another place;
And African saide, "Ye, withouten dread,"^o
And that our present worldes lifes space³
Nis^o but a manner^o death, what wey we trace,⁴
55 And rightful folk shall go, after they die,
To heaven; and shewed him the galaxy.

Then showed he him the little earth, that here is,

At regard of^o the hevenes quantity;
And after showed he him the nine spheres,
And after that the melody herde he
60 That cometh of thilke^o spheres thrice three,⁵
That well is of music and melody
In this world here, and cause of harmony.

Then bade he him, since erthe was so lite,^o
And full of torment and of harde grace,^o
65 That he ne should him in the world delite.
Then tolde he him, in certain yeres space,⁶
That every star should come into his place
There it was first; and all should out of mind^o
70 That in this world is done of all mankind.

Then prayed him Scipioun^o to tell him all
The way to come into that heavenly blisse;
And he said, "Know thyself first^o immortal,⁷
And look ay^o busily thou work and wisse^o
75 To common profit, and thou shalt not misse^o
To comen swiftly to that place dear,^o
That full of bliss is and of soules clear.^o

But breakers of the law, soth to seyne,^o
And lecherous folk, after that they be dead,
80 Shall always whirl about the earth in pain,
Til many a world be passed, out of dread,^o
And then, forgiven all their wicked deed,
Then shall they come unto that blissful place,
To which to comen God thee sende his grace!"

85 The day gan failen and the darke night,
That reveth^o bestes^o from their business,^o
Berafte me^o my book for lack of light,
And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,^o
Fulfilled of thought^o and busy heavinesse;^o

90 For both I hadde thing which that I nolde,
And eek^o I ne had that thing that I wolde.^o

But finally my spirit, at the last,
Forweary^o of my labor all the day,
Took rest, that made me to slepe faste,^o
And in my sleep I mette,^o as that I lay,
95 How African, right in the selfe aray^o
That Scipioun him saw before that tide,^o
Was come and stood right at my bedes side.

The weary hunter sleeping in his bed,
To woode again his minde goth anoon;^o
100 The judge dremeth how his pleas ben sped;^o
The carter dremeth how his cart is goon;
The rich, of gold; the knight fights with his foon;^o
The sick met^o he drinketh of the ton;^o
105 The lover met he hath his lady won.⁸

Can I not say if that the cause were
For^o I had read of African beforne,
That made me to met^o that he stood there;
But thus said he, "Thou hast thee so well born^o
110 In looking of min olde book totorn.^o
Of which Macrobie roghte^o not a lite,^o
That somdel^o of thy labor would I quite!"^o—

Citherea!⁹ thou blissful lady sweete,
That with thy firebrand dauntest whom thee lest,^o
And madest me this sweven^o for to mete,^o
115 Be thou my help in this, for thou mayst best;
As wisly^o as I saw thee north-north-west,
When I began my sweven for to write,¹
So give me might to rhyme and ek t'endite!^o

120 This foresaid African me hente^o anoon,

And forth with him unto a gate broughte
Right of a parke, walled of grene stone;
And over the gate, with letters large ywroghte,^o
There weren vers^o ywriten, as me thoghte,^o
On either half,^o of full great difference,
125 Of which I shall you say the plain sentence.^o

"Through me men go into that blissful place
Of hertes hele^o and dedly woundes cure;
Through me men go unto the welle^o of Grace,
There green and lusty^o May shall ever endure;
130 This is the way to all good aventure;^o
Be glad, thou reader, and thy sorrow ofcaste,^o
All open am I; passe in, and hie thee faste!"^o

"Through me men go," then spoke that other side,
"Unto the mortal strokes of the spear,
135 Of which Disdain and Danger^o is the guide,
There tree shall never fruit nor leves^o bear.
This stream you ledeth to the sorrowful were,^o
There as the fish in prison is all drie;
Th'eschewing^o is only the remedie."²

These vers of gold and black ywriten were,
Of whiche I gan astounded^o to beholde,
For with that one increased ay^o my fear,
And with that other gan min herte bolde;^o
145 That one me het,^o that other did me colde,^o
No wit had I, for^o error, for to chese^o
To entre or flee, or me to save or lese.^o

Right^o as, betwixen adamauntes^o two
Of even might,^o a piece of iron yset
That hath no might to move to ne fro—
150 For what that one may hale,^o that other let^o—
Ferde^o I; that niste whether me was bet,³

To enter or leave, til African my guide
Me hente,^o and shoof^o in at the gates wide,

155 And said, "It stondeth^o written in thy face,
Thin error, though thou tell it not to me;
But dread the not to come into this place,
For this writing nis nothing meant by thee,^o
Ne by none, but^o he Loves servant be;
160 For thou of love hast lost thy taste, I guess,
As sick man hath of sweet and bitterness.

But nonetheless, although that thou be dull,
Yet that thou canst not do, yet mayst thou see;
For many a man that may not stand^o a pulle,^o
Yet liketh him^o at wrestling for to be,
165 And demeth yet wher he do bet or he;⁴
And if thou haddest cunning for t'endite,^o
I shal thee shewen matter of to write."^o

With that my hand he took in his anoon,
Of which I comfort caught, and went in faste;^o
170 But Lord! so I was glad and well begoon!^o
For overall, where I min eyen^o caste,
Were trees clad with leaves that ay^o shall laste,
Each in his kinde,^o of colour fresh and green
As emerald, that joye was to seen:
175

The builder^o oak, and eek^o the hardy ash;
The piler⁵ elm, the cofre^o unto careine;^o
The boxtree piper;⁶ holm^o to whippes lash;
The sailing fir;⁷ the cipres, death to pleine;^o
The sheter ew,⁸ the asp for shaftes pleine^o;
180 The olive of peace, and eek^o the drunken vine,
The victor palm, the laurer to devine.^{o9}

A garden saw I, full of blosmy^o boughs,

Upon a river, in a grene mead,^o
 There as sweetness evermore ynow^o is,
 185 With flowers white, blue, yellow, and red;
 And colde welle-stremes, nothing dead,^o
 That swommen full of smale fisshes lighte,
 With finnes red and scales silver-brighte.

On every bough the birdes heard I sing,
 190 With voice of angel in their harmonie,
 Som busied them^o their birddes^o forth to bring;
 The little conies^o to their play gunne hie.^o
 And further all aboute I gan espie
 195 The dreadful roe, the buck,¹ the hart and hinde^o
 Squirrels, and bestes small of gentle kinde.^o

Of instruments of stringes in accord^o
 Heard I so play and ravissing sweetness,
 That God, that maker is of all and lord
 Ne heard never better, as I guess;
 200 Therewith a wind, unnethe^o it might be less^o
 Made in the leves grene a noise so softe
 Acordaunt to^o the briddes songe onlofte.^o

The air of that place so attempre^o was
 That never was grevaunce^o of hot ne cold;
 205 There wex^o eek^o every holsome spice and grass,^o
 Ne no man may there wexe^o sick ne old;
 Yet was ther joy more than a thousand fold
 Than man can tell; ne never wolde it night,^o
 But ay^o clear day to any mannes sight.
 210

Under a tree, beside a well,^o I say^o
 Cupide² our lord his arrows forge and file;
 And at his feet his bow all ready lay,
 And Wille^o his doghter tempered all this while
 The hedes^o in the welle, and with her file

215 She couched them after as they should serve,³
Some for to slay, and some to wounde and kerve.°

Then was I war° of Plesaunce anonright,°
And of Array,° and Lust,⁴ and Courtesy,
And of the Craft° that can and hath the might
220 To doon° by force a wight° to do folie—
Disfigurat° was she, I nil not° lie;
And by himself, under an oak, I guess,
Saw I Delight, that stood with Gentleness.°

225 I saw Beauty, withouten any attire,
And Youthe, ful of game and jolity,
Foolhardiness, Flattery, and Desire,
Messagerie,° and Mede,° and other three—
Their names shall not here be told for° me—
And upon pillars great of jasper° longe°
230 I saw a temple of brass yfounded stronge.°

About the temple daunceden alway°
Wommen ynowe,° of whiche some there were
Faire of herself,° and some of them were gay;°
In kirtels,⁵ all disshevele,° went they there—
235 That was their office° always, year by year—
And on the temple, of doves white and faire
Saw I sittinge many a hundred paire.

Before the temple door full soberly
240 Dame Peace sat, with a curtain in her hond;
And by her side, wonder discreetly,°
Dame Pacience sitting there I fond°
With face pale, upon an hille of sond;°
And aldernext,° within and eek withoute,°
Behest° and Art, and of their folke a route.°

245 Within the temple, with sighes° hot as fire

I heard a swogh^o that gan aboute renne;^o
Which sighes were engendred with^o desire,
That maden every altar for to brenne^o
Of newe flame; and well aspied I thenne
250 That all the cause of sorrow that they drie^o
Came of the bitter goddess Jealousy.

The god Priapus saw I,⁶ as I wente,
Within the temple, in sovereign^o place stonde,
In such array^o as when the ass him shente^o
255 With cry by night, and with septr^o in honde;
Full busily men gan assaye and fonde^o
Upon his head to set, of sundry hewe^o
Garlands full of flowers fresshe newe.

260 And in a privy corner, in desporte,^o
Found I Venus and her porter^o Richesse,
That was full noble and hautein of hir porte.^o
Dark was that place, but afterward lightness
I saw a little, unnethe^o it might be less,
And on a bed of gold she lay to reste,
265 Til that the hote sonne gan to weste.^o

Her gilte^o hairs with a golden thread
Ybounden were untressed^o as she lay,
And naked from the breast up to the head
Men might her see; and, sothly^o for to say,
270 The remenant was well covered to my pay^o
Right with a subtle kerchief^o of Valence,⁷
Ther was no thicker cloth of no defence.⁸

The place gave a thousand savours swote,^o
And Bachus,⁹ god of wine, sat her beside,
275 And Ceres next,¹ that doth of hunger bote;²
And, as I said, amiddes lay Cipride,³
To whom on knees two yonge folkes cried

To ben their help; but thus I let her lie,
 And further in the temple I gan espie
 280
 That, in dispite of Diane the chaste,⁴
 Ful many a bowe ybroke^o hung on the wall
 Of maidens, such as gan their times waste
 In her servise; and painted over all
 Full many a story, of which I touche shall
 285
 A fewe, as of Calixte⁵ and Athalante,⁶
 And many a maide, of which the name I wante;^o

 Semiramus,⁷ Candace,⁸ and Ercules,⁹
 Biblis,¹ Dido,² Thisbe, and Piramus,³
 290
 Tristram, Isoude,⁴ Paris,⁵ and Achilles,⁶
 Eleine, Cleopatre,⁷ and Troilus,⁸
 Silla,⁹ and eek^o the moder of Romulus¹—
 Alle these were painted on that other side,
 And all their love, and in what plight they died.

 When I was come again unto the place
 295
 That I of spoke, that was so sweet and green,
 Forth walked I then, myselven to solace.^o
 Then was I war^o where that there sat a queen
 That, as of light the summer sonne sheen
 Passethe the star, right so over mesure
 300
 She fairer was than any creature.

 And in a launde,^o upon an hill of flowers,
 Was set this noble goddess of Nature;
 Of branches were her halles and her bowers,^o
 Ywrought^o after her caste^o and her measure;
 305
 Ne ther nas fowl^o that cometh of engendrure,^o
 That they ne were all prest^o in her presence,
 To take her doom^o and give her audience.^o

For this was on Seint Valentines day,²
When every bird cometh there to choose his make,^o
310 Of every kinde, that men thenke may;
And that so huge a noise gan they make,
That earth and air, and tree, and every lake
So full was, that unnethe^o was there space
315 For me to stand, so full was all the place.

And right as Alain,³ in the Pleint of Kinde,^o
Deviseth^o Nature in array and face,
In such array men mighten her there finde.
This noble emperesse, full of grace
320 Bade every fowl to take his owne place,
As they were wont^o always from year to year,
Seint Valentines day, to stonden there.

That is to say, the foules of ravine^o
Were highest set; and thanne foules smale,
325 That eten as them Nature would encline,^o
As worm or thing of whiche I tell no tale;^o
And water-foul sat loweste in the dale;
But fowl that liveth by seed sat on the green,
And that so fele,^o that wonder was to seen.

There mighte men the royal eagle find,
330 That with his sharpe look pearceth the sonne;
And other egles of a lower kind,^o
Of which that clerkes well devisen cunne.^o
Ther was the tyrant with his feathers dunne^o
And greye, I mene the goshawk, that doth pine^o
335 To briddes for his outrageous ravine.^o

The gentle^o falcon, that with feet distreineth^o
The kinges hand; the hardy sperhawk^o eke
The quailles foe; the merlin^o that paineth

340 Himself full ofte, the larke for to seek;
 There was the dove, with hir eyen^o meek;
 The jealous swan, ayens^o her death that singeth;
 The owle eek, that of death the bode^o bringeth;

 The crane giant, with his trumpes soun^e;
 The thief the chogh;^o and eek the jangling pie;^o
345 The scorning jay; the eles^o foo, heroun^e;
 The false lapwing, ful of treachery;
 The starling, that the counseil^o can bewreie;^o
 The tame ruddok;^o and the coward kite;^o
 The cock, that orloge^o is of thorpes lite;^o
350

 The sparrow, Venus son; the nightingale,
 That clepeth^o forth the grene leves^o newe;
 The swallow, morder^o of the flies^o smale
 That maken hony of flowers fresshe of hewe;^o
 The wedded turtle,^o with hir herte trewe;
355 The peacok, with his angels feathers bright;
 The fesaunt,^o scorner of the cock by night;

 The waker^o goose; the cuckoo most unkinde;⁴
 The popinjay, ful of delicacy;^o
 The drake, stroyer^o of his owne kinde;^o
360 The stork, the wreker^o of avouterie;^o
 The hote^o cormeraunt of gluttony;
 The raven wise, the crow with voice of care;^o
 The thrustle^o old; the frosty feldefare.^o

365 What should I say? of foules every kind
 That in this world han feathers and stature,^o
 Men mighten in that place assembled find
 Before the noble goddess of Nature
 And everich^o of them did his busy cure^o
 Benignely^o to choose or for to take,
370 By hir acord, his formel^o or his make.^o

But to the point—Nature held on hir hond^o
A formel eagle, of shape the gentlest^o
That ever she among her workes fonde,^o
The most benigne and the goodliest;
375 In her was every vertue at his reste,^o
So ferforth,^o that Nature herself had blisse
To look on her, and ofte her beak to kisse.

Nature, the vicarie^o of th'almighty lorde,
That hot, cold, heavy, light, and moist and dreie^o
380 Hath knit with even number of accorde,^o
In easy voice gan for to speak and seye,
"Foules, take heed of my sentence,^o I pray,
And, for your ease, in furthering of your^o need,
385 As faste as I may speak, I will me speed.⁵

You know well how, Saint Valentines day,
By my statute and through my governaunce,
You come for to choose—and flee your way—
Your makes,^o as I prick^o you with plesaunce.^o
But nonetheless, my rightful ordenaunce^o
390 May I not break, for all this world to win,^o
That he that most is worthy shall begin.

The tercel^o eagle, as that you know full well,
The foul^o royal above you in degree,
395 The wise and worthy, secree,^o trewe as steel,
The which I formed have, as you may see,
In every part as it best liketh me,^o
It nedeth not his shape^o you to devise,^o
He shall first choose and speken in his guise.^o

And after him, by order shall you choose,
400 After your kind,^o everich as you liketh,^o
And, as your hap^o is, shall you win or lose;

But which of you that love most entriketh,^o
God sende him her that sorest for him siketh."^o
And therewithal the tercel gan she call,
405 And said, "My son the choice is to you fall.

"But nonetheless, on this condition
Must be the choice of everich that is here,
That she agree to his election,^o
410 Whatso he be^o that shulde be her fere;^o
This is our usage^o always from year to year;
And who so may at this time have his grace,^o
In blissful time he came into this place."

With head inclined and with full humble chere^o
415 This royal tercel spoke and taried not:
"Unto my sovereign lady, and not my fere,⁶
I choose, and choose with will and heart and
thought,
The formel^o on your hand so well ywrought,^o
Whose I am all and ever will her serve,
420 Do what hir list,⁷ to do me live or sterve.^o

Beseeching her of mercy and of grace,
As she that is my lady sovereigne;
Or let me die present^o in this place.
For certes,^o long I may not live in pain;
425 For in min heart is corven^o every vein;
And haveinge only reward to⁸ my truthe^o
My dere heart, have on my woe some routh.^o

And if that I to her be founde untrue,^o
Disobeisaunt,^o or wilful^o negligent,
Avauntour,^o or in process^o love a newe,
430 I pray to you this be my jugement,
That with^o these foules I be all torent,^o
That ilke^o day that ever she me finde

To hir untrue, or in my guilt unkinde.°

435 And since that none loveth her so well as I,
All be she never of love me behette,⁹
Then oughte she be min through her mercy,
For other bond can I none on hir knet.°
For never, for no woe, ne shall I let°
440 To serven her, how far so that she wende;°
Sey what you list my tale is at an ende."

Right as the fresshe, rede rose newe
Ayen° the summer sonne colored is,
Right so for shame all wexen gan her hewe
Of this formel,° when that she heard all this;
445 She neither answered well ne said amiss
So sore abasshed was she, til that Nature
Said "Daughter, dread you noght, I you assure."

Another tercel eagle spoke anoon
Of lower kinde,¹ and said, "That shall not be;
450 I love her bet° than ye do, by Saint John,
Or at the least I love as well as ye;
And longer have her served, in my degree,°
And if she shulde have loved for long loving,
To me alone had been° the guerdoninge.°
455

I dare eek seyn, if she me finde false,
Unkinde, jangler,° or rebel in any wise,°
Or jealous, do me hongen° by the hals!°
And but I bear me° in her servise
As well as that my wit can me suffice,
460 From point to point,° her honor for to save,
Take she my life, and all the good I have."

The thridde tercel eagle answerd tho,°
"Now, sirs, ye seen the little leiser° here;

465 For every foul cryeth out to been ago
Forth with his make,o or with his lady dear;
And eek Nature herself ne will not hear,
For tarrying here, not half that I wold seye;
And but I speak, I must for sorrow deie.

470 Of long service avaunte I me nothing,o
But as possible is me to die today
For woe, as he that hath ben languisshing
These twenty winter, and well happen may
A man may serven bet and more to payo
In half a year, although it were no more,
475 Than some man doth that hath served full yore.o

I say not this by me,o for I ne can
Do no servise that may my lady please;
But I dare seyn, I am hir truest man
485 As to my dome,2 and faintest would her ease;o
At shorte wordes, til that death me seize,o
I will be hers, whether I wake or winke,o
And true in all that herte may bethinke."

Of all my life, since that day I was born,
485 So gentle pleao in love or other thing
Ne herde never no man me beforne,
Whoso that hadde leisure and cunningo
For to rehearseo their cheero and their speaking;
And from the morrow gan this speche laste
490 Til dounward drew the sonne wonder faste.

The noise of foules for to ben deliveredo
So loude rang, "Have done and let us wende!"o
That well wendeo I the wodeo had all toshivered.o
"Come off!"o they cried, "Allas! you will us shend!"o
495 When shall your cursed pleading have an end?
How should a judge either party leve,o

For yea or nay, withouten any preve?"^o

The goose, the cuckoo, and the duck also
So criden, "Kek kek!" "Kukkow!" "Quek quek!" hie,^o
That through min ears the noise wente tho.^o
500 The goose said, "All this nis not worth a flie!
But I can shape^o hereof a remedy,
And I will say my verdict faire and swithe³
For^o water-foul, whoso be wrath or blithe."^o

"And I for worm-foul," quod the fool^o cuckoo,
505 "And I will, of min owne authority,
For common profit,^o take the charge^o now,
For to delivere^o us is great charity."
"You may abide a while yet, parde^o!"
Quod the turtel,^o "If it be your will
510 A wight may speak him were as good be still."⁴

"I am a seed-foul, oon^o the unworthieste
That wot I well, and little of kunning;^o
But bet^o is that a wightes^o tonge reste
Than entermeten him of such doing⁵
515 Of which he neither rede^o can nor sing.
And whoso doth, ful foule himself acloyeth,^o
For office uncommitted⁶ ofte anyoeth."

Nature, which that alway had an ear
To murmur of the lewednes^o behinde,
520 With facound^o voice said, "Hold your tonges there!
And I shall soon, I hope, a counseil^o finde^o
You to delivere, and from this noise^o unbinde;
I judge, of every folk men shal one call
To seyn the verdict for you foules all."
525

Assented were to this conclusioun
The briddes alle; and foules of ravine^o

530 Han chosen first, by plein^o election,
The tercelet^o of the falcon, to define
All their sentence and, as them list, termine;⁷
And to Nature him gonnen to present,
And she accepteth him with glad intent.

535 The tercelet said then in this manner:
"Full hard were it to prove by resoun
Who loveth best this gentle formel^o here;
For everich^o hath such replicacioun,^o
That none by skilles^o may be brought adoun;
I can not seen that arguments availe;
Then semeth it there moste be bataile."^o

540 "All ready!" quod these eagles tercels tho.^o
"Nay sirs!" quod he, "if that I dorste^o it say,
You do me wrong, my tale^o is not ydo!^o
For sirs, ne taketh noght agrief,^o I prey,
It may not gon, as you wolde, in this way;
Ours is the voice that han the charge on honde,^o
545 And to the judges dome^o you moten stonde;^o

550 "And therefore, peace! I say, as to my wit
Me wolde think how that the worthiest
Of knighthood, and longest hath used it,
Moste of estate,^o of blood the gentilest,^o
Were sittingest^o for her, if that her leste;^o
And of these three she wot^o herself, I trowe,^o
Which that he be, for it is light^o to knowe."

555 The water-foules han their heades laid
Together, and of a short avisement,^o
When everich had his large golee^o said,
They saiden sothly, all by one assent,
How that "The goose, with hir facounde gent,^o
That so desireth to pronounce our need,^o

560 Shal telle our tale" and preide "God her speed."

And for these water-foules tho^o began
The goose to speak, and in her cakeling
She saide, "Peace! now take keep^o every man,
And herkeneth^o which a reason I shall bring;
My wit is sharp, I love no tarryinge;
565 I say, I rede^o him, though he were my brother,
But^o she will love him, let him take another!"

"Lo here! a perfect reason of a goose!"
Quod the sperhawk; "Never mot she thee!^o
Lo, such it is to have a tonge loose!
570 Now parde,^o fool, yet were it bet^o for thee
Have hold thy peace, than shewen thy nicete!^o
It lith not in his wit nor in his will,
But sooth is said, 'A fool can not be still.' "

575 The laughter arose of gentle^o foules alle,
And right anoon the seed-foul chosen had
The turtel^o trewe, and gunne her to them calle,
And preiden^o her to say the sothe sad^o
Of this matter, and asked what she rad;^o
And she answered, that plainly her intent
580 She would it show, and sothly what she meant.

"Nay, God forbide a lover shulde chaunge!"^o
The turtle said, and wex^o for shame all red;
"Though^o that his lady evermore be strange,^o
Yet let him serve hir, til that he be dead;
585 For sothe, I praise not the gooses reed;^o
For though she died, I would^o none other make,^o
I will ben hers, til that the death me take."

"Well bourded!"^o quod the duck, "By my hat!
590 That men should loven always causeles,^o

Who can a reason find or wit in that?
Daunceth he merry that is mirthelless?
Who shoulde recche^o of that is reccheles?"^o
"Quek, quek!" yet seith the duck, full well and faire,
"There been mo^o stars, God wot, than a pair!"
595

"Now fie, churl!"^o quod the gentle tercelet,^o
"Out of the dunghill came that word full right,
Thou canst noght see what thing is well beset:^o
Thou farest by love as owles^o doon by light,
The day them blent,^o but well they see by night;
600 Thy kind^o is of so low a wretchedness,
That what love is, thou canst nat see ne guess."

Tho gan the cuckoo put him forth in press^o
For fowl that eteth worm and seide blive,^o
"So^o I," quod he, "may have my make^o in peace,
605 I recche not^o how longe that ye strive;
Let each of them be solein^o all their lyve,
This is my reed,^o sin^o they may not acorde;
This shorte lesson nedeth not recorde."^o

"Ye! have the glutton filled enough his paunche,⁸
610 Then are we well!" seid then a merlion;^o
"Thou murderer of the heisugge^o on the branche
That brought thee forth, thou ruthelless glutton!
Live thou solein, wormes corruption!^o
For no fors is of lack of thy nature;⁹
615 Go, lewed^o be thou, while the world may dure!"^o

"Now peace," quod Nature, "I comaunde here;
For I have heard all your opinioun,
And in effect yet be we not the nere;^o
But finally, this is my conclusion,
620 That she herself shall han the election
Of whom her list,^o whoso be wrath or blythe,^o

Him that she cheest,o he shall her have as swithe.o

For since it may not here discussed be
Who loveth her best, as said the tercelet,
625 Then will I do her this favor, that she
Shall have right him on whom her heart is set,
And he her that his heart hath on hir knet.o
Thus judge I, Nature, for I may not lie;
630 To none estate I have none other ye.o

But as for counseil for to chese a make,o
If I were Reason, certes,o then would I
Counsel you the royal tercel take,
As said the tercelet full skilfully,
635 As for the gentilesto and most worthy,
Which I have wroughto so well too my plesance;
That to you ought to been a suffisance."o

With dreadfulo voice the formelo her answered,
"My rightful lady, goddess of Nature,
640 Sotho is that I am ever under your yarde,o
Like as is everiche other creature,
And mooto be yours while that my life may dure;o
And therefore granteth me my firste bone,o
And min intento that will I say well soon."

"I graunte it you," quod she; and right anon
645 This formel eagle spoke in this degree,o
"Almighty queen, untoo this year be gon
I ask respite for to avisen me.o
And after that to have my choice all free;
This all and sum, that I will speak and seye;
650 Ye gete no more, although ye do me deie.o

"I wol not serven Venus ne Cupide
For sotho as yet, by no manner way."

655 "Now since it may none other wise betide,"
Quod tho^o Nature, "here is no more to say;
Then would I that these foules were away
Each with his make, for^o tarrying longer here"—
And saide them^o thus, as ye shall after hear.

660 "To you speak I, you terceletts," quod Nature,
"Beth of good heart and serveth, alle three;
A year is not so longe to endure,
And each of you pain him,^o in his degree,
For to do well; for, God wot, quit^o is she
From you this year; what after so befall^o,
665 This entremes^o is dressed^o for you alle."

And when this work all brought was to an end
To every foule Nature gave his make
By even acorde,^o and on their way they wend.^o
But Lord! the bliss and joye that they make!
For each gan other in his winges take,
670 And with their nekkes each gan other winde,^o
Thanking always the noble queen of kinde.^o

But first were chosen foules for to sing,
As year by year was always the usaunce^o
675 To sing a roundel¹ at their departing,
To do to Nature honor and plesaunce.
The note,^o I trowe,^o ymaked^o was in Fraunce;
The wordes were such as you may here find,
The nexte verse, as I now have in mind.

680 "Now welcome summer, with thy sonne softe,
That hast this winters weathers overshake,^o
And driven away the longe nightes blake!
"Saint Valentin, that art full high onlofte;^o—
Thus singen smale foules for thy sake—
Now welcom summer, with thy sonne softe,

685 That hast this winters weathers overshake.

“Well han they cause for to gladen ofte,
 Sith^o each of them recovered hath his make;
 Full blissful may they singen when they wake;
 690 Now welcom summer, with thy sonne softe,
 That hast this winters weathers overshake,
 And driven away the longe nightes blake.”^o
 And with the shouting, when the song was do,^o

695 That foules maden at their flight away
 I woke, and other bokes took me to
 To read upon, and yet I read alway;
 In hope, ywis,^o to read so some day
 That I shal mete² som thing for to fare
 The bet;³ and thus to read I will not spare.^o

Endnotes

- Note 1: The text has been edited by James Simpson with help from Christopher Cannon and Michelle de Groot. For the principles by which this text has been modernized, see the headnote to Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (p. 470).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Middle English rendering of a Latin proverb (*Ars longa, vita brevis*). Chaucer probably encountered it in the Roman Stoic Seneca’s essay “On the Brevity of Life” (1.1), but Seneca himself was quoting the Greek physician Hippocrates’ *Aphorisms* (1). Chaucer’s translation, “craft,” makes explicit the classical and medieval conception of poetic art as a skill comparable to practical skills like medicine or carpentry.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Passes so quickly.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, all this refers to love.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Miraculous operation.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: I do not know.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Pays people for their service.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Am unable to do anything more.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Habitually, both for enjoyment and edification.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, to come to the point.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *The Dream of Scipio* is the closing episode of Marcus Tullius Cicero's *De re publica*, composed in 51 B.C.E. It is told from the point of view of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Younger, who traveled to Carthage in North Africa as part of his duties as a military tribune. There, he visits King Masinissa, an old friend of his grandfather, Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Elder (Chaucer calls him "African" here). During his visit, Scipio's grandfather visits him in a dream. Taking him up into the sky, Scipio the Elder shows his grandson the nine planetary spheres of classical cosmography and exhorts him to stoic civic virtue. The *Dream* was known in the Middle Ages through an influential late 4th-century commentary by Macrobius, which uses the Ciceronian text to discourse on a number of topics in natural history, astronomy, and dream theory.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, lifetime.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Whichever path we take.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: According to classical and medieval cosmography, the earth sat at the center of nine planetary spheres, each of which turned at a different rate. Their rotation was believed to generate ethereal music.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, in time.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, know first of all that you are immortal. A version of the Delphic maxim "Know thyself."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8:
Chaucer is alluding to Macrobius's theory of dreams put forth in his commentary on *The Dream of Scipio*. Macrobius proposes that nightmares (*insomnia*) are a category of dream that contain no prophetic significance and instead result from mental reactions to the events of the day. Another category of dream

that Macrobius describes is the oracle (*oraculum*), in which a trusted authority figure appears and offers advice. *The Dream of Scipio* is an oracular dream. Chaucer is also aware of a more refined, 12th-century categorization of nonpredictive dreams, the so-called animal dream, according to which many dreams simply replicate what the dreamer has been doing during the day. Chaucer here is equivocating about what kind of dream the *Parliament of Birds* might be.

[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Cytherea, another name for Venus, the Roman goddess of love. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Probably an astronomical reference to the position of the planet Venus in the sky when Chaucer began to compose the poem. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The contradictory inscriptions on the gate are reminiscent of the words on the gates to hell in Dante's *Inferno* 3.1–9. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: I knew not whether it would be better for me. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, still judges which wrestler does better. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Serviceable for supports. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Boxtree for pipe making. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Fir tree good for making boats. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Yew tree good for archery equipment. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: These lines associate species of trees with their uses in human crafts. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Timid female and male roe deer. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Cupid, Roman god of love, son of Venus. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, laid them out according to their function. The Italian poet Boccaccio describes this scene in the *Teseida* (7.50–66). [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Desire. The word did not always have the pejorative connotation that it does today. [Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Kirtel, a garment for women or girls, often an outer garment, sometimes worn over a smock or under a mantle, gown, or cloak.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Priapus, a Roman fertility god represented iconographically as a small man with a comically large penis. Chaucer refers to a story in Ovid's *Fasti* (1.415–40), in which Priapus is thwarted in his plans to rape a sleeping nymph when a donkey brays and wakes her. She runs away, and her compatriots, now aware of the situation, mock Priapus and his erection. Boccaccio also recounts the story in the *Teseida* (7.60).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Thin, fine, openwork cloth from Valence (in southern France) or Valenciennes (in northern France), towns known for fine clothmaking.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, there was no thicker cloth to provide defense.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Bacchus, Roman god of wine.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Ceres, Roman goddess of the harvest[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, cures hunger.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In the center lay Venus. "Cipride" is another name for Venus.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In order to spite Diana the chaste. Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt, archery, and the moon, was associated with strict virginity. She was said to have a retinue of virginal huntresses.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Callisto, a member of Diana's retinue of huntresses. She was raped by Jove and became pregnant; when Diana discovered this, she banished her. Meanwhile, Juno, Jove's wife, turned her and her son into bears. To save them, Jove swept them into the sky, where they became the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.409–507.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Atalanta, a gifted runner who vowed she would never marry unless a man bested her in a footrace. With Venus's help, Hippomenes tricked Atalanta by distracting her during the race

- with golden apples and so married her. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.560–707.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Semiramis, an Assyrian queen, believed to have built Babylon and an emblem of sexual perversion in the Middle Ages. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.59, and Dante, *Inferno* 5.52–60.[Return to reference 7](#)
 - Note 8: Probably Canace, the daughter of the Roman god of wind, Aeolus, whom he forced to commit suicide after she became pregnant by her brother. See Ovid, *Heroides* 11.[Return to reference 8](#)
 - Note 9: Hercules. Though famous for his twelve labors, he died when his wife, attempting to regain his affection, sent him a cloak soaked in the blood of a centaur he had killed, not knowing he had killed the creature with a poisoned arrow. He died in agony when he put on the poison-soaked cloak. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.198–238.[Return to reference 9](#)
 - Note 1: Byblis, a classical figure who fell in love with her brother and went insane when he rejected her. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.454–655.[Return to reference 1](#)
 - Note 2: Dido, queen of Carthage. She fell in love with Aeneas and committed suicide when he abandoned her to fulfill his destiny as the founder of Rome. See Virgil, *Aeneid* 4, and Ovid, *Heroides* 7.[Return to reference 2](#)
 - Note 3: Piramus and Thisbe, tragic lovers on whom the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is based. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.55–106.[Return to reference 3](#)
 - Note 4: Tristram and Isoude, tragic adulterous lovers in Arthurian legend. See, for instance, Thomas, *Le Roman de Tristan* (12th century), pp. 192–95.[Return to reference 4](#)
 - Note 5: Paris and Helen (here spelled “Eleine”) set off the Trojan War when they eloped. See Ovid, *Heroides* 16 and 17.[Return to reference 5](#)
 - Note 6: Achilles, famous in the Middle Ages for dying of love for Polyxena. See Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, lines 1067–71.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. She had love affairs first with Julius Caesar and then with Mark Anthony; she committed suicide after Mark Anthony's death. See Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Troilus, the hero of Chaucer's major poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, died after he was betrayed by his lover, Criseyde, during the Trojan War. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Scylla, daughter of Nisus, king of Megara. When King Minos of Crete besieged the city, she betrayed Megara for love of him. When Minos discovered what she had done, he spurned her in disgust at her unfilial behavior. She was then transformed into a bird. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.1–74. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Rhea Silvia. Romulus was the founder of Rome, who, according to Ovid, was fathered by Mars. She was killed by her uncle after giving birth. See Ovid, *Fasti* 3.9–45. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Saint Valentine's Day, February 14. Saint Valentine was an early Christian martyr; the modern association between Valentine's Day and romantic love almost certainly begins with this poem. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:
Alan of Lille, in *The Complaint of Nature*. The 12th-century Latin poem describes Nature allegorically as a goddess of luminous and sensual (though modest) beauty, wearing a golden crown with jewels representing the constellations of the zodiac and the seven planetary spheres. She is dressed in a finely woven garment with shifting colors (representing air) that resolve into images of birds, a mantle representing water covered with images of aquatic animals, and a tunic representing earth with images of land animals, including humankind. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Unnatural. The cuckoo was often a symbol during the Middle Ages of unfaithfulness, fickleness, or dishonesty, due in part to its habit of laying eggs in other birds' nests. [Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: That is, I will speak as quickly as I can.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Wife. The contrast here is between a sovereign lady, above the speaker in rank, and an espoused wife, who was seen as theologically as well as socially subordinate to her husband.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Regardless of her doing whatever she wants.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Taking only into consideration.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Even though she never vowed her love to me.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Lower birth (that is, a less noble species).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: According to my judgment.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Eloquent and without delay.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: If it is *your* (the Cuckoo's) desire that a person might speak, it would be preferable that he stay silent.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: For him to interfere in such proceedings.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A fulfilled but unassigned duty.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: To declare their collective judgment and, as they wished, conclude.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: As long as the glutton has filled his stomach.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: (It would be) no matter if there were none of your kind.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A short poem on two rhymes, with the opening line(s) serving as refrain in the middle and at the end. The form originated in France and was often set to music.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Chaucer puns here on the double meaning of "mete" (both "to meet" and "to dream").[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That I shall find (or dream) something so that I may fare better.[Return to reference 3](#)

Notes

- °: *the attempt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fierce* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fearful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is bewildered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *painfully* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whether* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *although* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in practice* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nor know* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I chance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *books* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *anger* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *say (anything)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *except* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *long* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chanced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intently* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fields* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grain* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *faith* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knowledge* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learn* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delight* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seemed to pass quickly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(Cicero)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *briefly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discuss* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meaning* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nub* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Africa* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *embraced* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drew to a close* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vantage point in the heavens* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *showed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *future fortune* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *told him that* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *learned or unlearned* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the common good* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with integrity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *where* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *is not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a kind of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in proportion to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *challenging experience* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be forgotten* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Scipio asked* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *first of all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *teach* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fail* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *excellent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purified* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to tell the truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for many ages, certainly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deprives* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *animals* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *their activity* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took from me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I prepared myself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mental oppression* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *anxious worry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *did not want*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wanted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *exhausted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soundly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreamed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same clothing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cases are succeeding*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dreams* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barrel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *that*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *conducted yourself so well*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tattered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cared* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not a little (very much)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a part* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I wish to repay*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *subdue whom you please*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dream* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to dream*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also to compose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lines of verse* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as it seemed to me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *side*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meaning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *health*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spring*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleasurable*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *chance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cast off*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prosper readily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrogant standoffishness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leaves*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *weir*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avoidance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perplexed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to become emboldened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *encouraged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chilled me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for fear of* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *choose*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abandon (myself)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *just* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *between magnets*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *equal strength*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pull on* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hinders*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *acted*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *took* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pushed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stands*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *does not refer to you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nor to anyone, unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *withstand* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrestling throw*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *it pleases him*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *skill in poetic composition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to write about*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eagerly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well placed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *species*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *serviceable for building* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *coffin* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bodies* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holly bush* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lament* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *straight lances, arrows* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laurel tree to prophesy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blossoming* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *meadow* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in abundance* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *extraordinarily alive* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *occupied themselves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chicks* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rabbits* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hurried* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *male and female red deer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in harmony* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hardly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lighter* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in harmony with* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on high* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *moderate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discomfort* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grew* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herb* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *become* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *night never fell* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *always* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spring* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Desire* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrowheads* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *pierce*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *aware* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *immediately*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Adornment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Craftiness, Cunning*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cause* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deformed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I will not*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Nobility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Sending of secret messages* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Gift*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(a green, precious stone)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tall*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with strong foundations*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *danced always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many women*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splendidly dressed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with hair unbound*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *duty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with remarkable discretion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sand*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *next* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also outside*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Promise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *company*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rushing sound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *filled the place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begotten by*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *burn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *suffer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the preeminent*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *state* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *put him to shame* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(penis)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attempt and strive* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *various colours* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amusing themselves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gatekeeper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proud of her bearing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hardly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to set* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *golden* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bound, but not arranged* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *truly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to my liking* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fine veil* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sweet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broken* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I lack* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *also* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *comfort myself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I noticed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clearing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chambers* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *constructed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *design* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bird* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *procreation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ready* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *receive her judgment* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attend to her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hardly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Complaint of Nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *portrays* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *accustomed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *birds of prey* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *prompt* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *speak not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *many* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *scholars can well describe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brown* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *injure* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *violent predation* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holds fast* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brave sparrow hawk* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(a small falcon)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *near to* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *message* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sound* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jackdaw* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chattering magpie* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eel's* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heron* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secret* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *betray* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *robin* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(a large bird of prey)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *timekeeper* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small villages* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *calls* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leaves* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *killer* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bees* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *color* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turtle dove* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pheasant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wakeful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *love of luxury* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroyer* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *kin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *avenger* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *adultery*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hot; passionate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *grief*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *song thrush* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *field thrush*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have a body; exist*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made it his active business*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with good will*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *female bird* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wrist*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noblest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *found*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in its (proper) place*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to such a degree*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vice regent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in balance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *judgment*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *supplying what you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *partners* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *incite* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *desire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *protocols*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for any reason*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *male bird of prey*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bird*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *discreet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pleases me*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nature* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *describe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as he pleases*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *species* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *it pleases you*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ensnares*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sighs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *choice*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever bird he is* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *custom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *attain his desire*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *female eagle* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *to cause me to die*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *here*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cut*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fidelity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pity*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unfaithful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disobedient;* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purposely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *braggart* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the course of time*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *by* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *torn apart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *same*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unnatural*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bind*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cease*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever she goes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *toward*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *(the female eagle blushed deeply)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *according to my rank*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *should be* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reward*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *indiscreet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *way* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hang me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *neck* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless I comport myself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in every detail* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time available* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I boast not at all* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more pleasingly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *for a long time* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *with regard to myself* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *most eagerly want to please her* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *takes me* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sleep* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble pleading of a case* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *time and skill* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *reproduce* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *expression* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *released* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *go* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thought* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *forest* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *splintered* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *finish up* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destroy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proof* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loudly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *devise* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *representing* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *angry or happy* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *public good* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *responsibility*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *release*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turtledove*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one of*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *of moderate skill*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *person's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *harms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the ignorant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eloquent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *plan* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *devise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disagreement*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *birds of prey*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *full*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *male*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *female eagle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *each one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *a rejoinder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arguments*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *combat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *dared*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *statement* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *finished*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *amiss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *have the matter in hand*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *decision* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must abide*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *social rank* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noblest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *most appropriate* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *if she so desires*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knows* [Return to reference](#) °

- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *easy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consultation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *throatful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well bred eloquence*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deliver our opinion*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pay attention*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *listen to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advise*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *may she prosper*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *indeed* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *better*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolishness*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *turtledove*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *requested* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *settled truth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *advised*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vacillate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *became*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *even if* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *standoffish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counsel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *would wish* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wittily answered*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unrequited*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *care* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *one who is indifferent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peasant* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noble male eagle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *well done*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *owls*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *blinds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nature; species*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *came forward in the crowd*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *quickly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so long as* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *I don't care*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *alone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *counsel* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *since*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *be set down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *merlin (small falcon)*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hedge sparrow*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *detroyer of worms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ignorant one* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *last*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *she wants* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whoever is mad or glad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chooses* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *at once*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fixed on her*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *no partiality*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *choose a mate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *certainly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *noblest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *according to*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *all you need*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fearful* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *female eagle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the truth* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *governance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *last*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *request*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *wish*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *manner*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *until*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to consider the issue*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *put me to death*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *truly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *then*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to avoid*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to them*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *take pains*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *free*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *whatever happens afterward*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *interval of time* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *arranged*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *by mutual agreement* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *to embrace*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *nature*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *custom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tune* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *believe* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *composed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dispelled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *above*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *since*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dark*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *done*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *indeed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cease*[Return to reference °](#)

ROBERT HENRYSON

Robert Henryson (ca. 1425–ca. 1500) is perhaps the greatest of a set of exceptionally accomplished late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Scots poets.

Little is known for certain about Henryson's life. Because he is spoken of as "master," he probably held a master's degree, and evidence points to his having been a schoolmaster in a grammar school founded by monks in the town of Dunfermline, just to the north of Edinburgh. He is the author of three major works: *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Moral Fables*, and *The Testament of Cresseid*. Together, they reveal an author skilled in legal, literary, and philosophical traditions; they also reveal a great and ambitious literary artist capable of trenchant comedy within a larger vision that is dark, austere, and commanding. His intense poem *The Testament of Cresseid*, for example, is a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. It imagines the fate of Criseyde/Cresseid as she becomes sexually promiscuous in the Greek camp, stricken with both leprosy and, finally, remorse. In sixteenth-century editions of Chaucer's works, this text was routinely printed at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* as its sixth book.

As a schoolmaster, Henryson would have taught schoolboys how to read Latin; one of the texts would have been a collection of animal fables (probably the so-called late twelfth-century elegiac *Romulus*) (see [p. 644](#)). Henryson took up the challenge of these simple school texts to transform them into a work of extraordinary range, from the cute and comic, to the savagely satirical, to the philosophically dark and bleak. He drew on previous works of animal literature (especially Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, in his *The Cock and the Fox*). His particular contribution, however, is to extend the philosophical and rhetorical range of the fables and to press their interpretive challenges to the limit. Fable traditions generally present animals as reduced and recognizable humans, designed to guide

human behavior in simple ways. Not so for Henryson, and not so in this opening fable of the collection, *The Cock and the Jasper*.

Fables can be thought of as the dunghill of literature, the place of worthless scraps and sweepings. Only the moral interpretation, outside and attached to the animal narrative, invests the low story with high significance. *The Cock and the Jasper* begins in precisely the locus of the dunghill in the farmyard. But just as fables might in fact hide rich literary treasure, so too does the cock find a jewel in the filth. And so far from dismissing it, the cock exercises discretion to know both what's for him and what's not (a standard kind of practical advice enjoined by fables). The cock is even a rhetorical master in his crafted apostrophe to the jasper. We might seem to have a complete fable here, since the cock would seem to have persuasively moralized the narrative from within, even before we reach the *Moralitas* in the concluding stanzas.

Animal stories are, however, full of sudden jolts as we shift from the animal to the human perspective. Henryson does not want us to settle for easy treasure and instead surprises us with an unexpected morality in the appended interpretation of the apparently wise cock. As an animal, he might be wise; as a human, he's missed the point of fables.

The Cock and the Jasper¹

A cock one time, with feathers pert and bright,
Canty^o and bold, although he was dirt poor,
Rose and flew to a dunghill at first light,
An early bird, already to the fore,
5 Scraping away, when the next thing in the stour^o
He finds this gemstone under dust and ashes,
Swept out by chance with sweepings from the
house.

Giddy young ones, with their minds on nothing
But swanking in the street and being seen
Have little interest in their besoming.^o
10 They birl the brush^o to make the floor look clean.
So precious items dropped are very often
Swept from the doorstep out into the yard.
Something like that, in this case, had occurred.

He marvels at the stone and then says he,
15 'O jewel rare, O rich and noble thing,
I may have found you, but you're not for me.
You are a gemstone for a lord or king.
For you to be interred here in the dung
Is a great pity, down in the muck and mold,
20 And you so lovely and worth so much gold.

'And a pity I should find you, who could never
Make clear hues like yours more sheer and clear
Nor prove your great worth any worthier:
Little about you gives me heart or cheer.
25 Let great lords cherish you and hold you dear.
Lesser things are better fit to tempt me,

Like corn or hogwash when my gizzard's empty.

30 'I'd rather be here scraping with my nails
In dust and dirt for dear life, hunting food—
The dregs and dross and little worms and snails
Or any grub at all that does me good—
I'd rather them than gems by the cartload.
While you, for your part, are uninterested
35 In anything that I desire or need.

'You don't have corn, and corn is what I covet.
Your color calms the eye and feeds the sight
But color's never going to feed my gullet.
I'm foraging from morning until night
40 And on the lookout always. But that's it!
How can I live on looks? It's food I need,
Not cooked or even hot: I'd eat dry bread.

'But where, gemstone, should be your habitation?
Where should you dwell but in a royal tower?
Where should you sit but on a royal crown
45 Exalted and installed in honor there?²
Arise, Sir Jasper, fairest of the fair,
Shake off this filth and go where you should be.
I was not meant for you, nor you for me.'

50 Leaving the jewel lying on the ground,
This cock went foraging upon his way.
But when or how or by whom it was found
I have no sure report, so cannot say.
But the inner point and import and idea
Behind the fable in the original
55 I shall rehearse in plain and homely style.

The properties of this fair gem are seven:
First, as to color, it is marvelous,
Like fire partly, partly like the heaven.
It makes a man strong and victorious,
60 Preserves him too when things turn dangerous.
Whoever has this stone, good luck will favor:
No need for him to fear the fire or water.

This noble jasper, with its changing hue,
Signifies true wisdom and true learning
65 Perfected by the exercise of virtue
And far excelling any earthly thing.
This is what inclines men to good living
And makes them glad to strive, and fit to conquer
Every vice and spiritual danger.
70

Who's to be wealthy, kind, courageous?
Who is immune to chance and misadventure?
Who can take charge in home, town-hall or palace
And be a know-nothing? No one, for sure.
Knowledge is the wealth that will endure,
75 That rain won't ruin, nor moth nor rust devour.³
To man's soul it is sustenance forever.

This cock, so obsessed with ordinary corn
He scorned a jasper, may in his ignorance
Be likened to a fool, who will scoff and scorn
80 At learning; impervious, thick, a dunce,
He takes a scunner at^o wise arguments,
The same as a sow that snotters in her gruel,
And spurns pearls in the trough, preferring swill.⁴

Ignoramuses are the enemy
85 Of knowledge and of learning, and possess
No understanding of a thing so worthy,
So noble it is past all earthly price.

90 The luckiest man is one who spends his days
In study of the knowledge of the good:
A man like that fulfils his every need.

95 But now, alas, this jewel is lost and hid;
No one looks for it, no one pursues
The study of it. We make our wealth our god⁵
And turn our souls to paupers, gain to lose.
But talk of this is like the wind that blows.
Therefore I conclude. I have said my say.
Look for the jewel who will, for there it lay.

Endnotes

- Note 1: This translation is by Seamus Heaney, *The Testament of Cresseid & Seven Fables* (2009). Jasper is a stone, quartz or chalcedony, that may be polished and used as a gemstone.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Note the triple apostrophe, characteristic of courtly rhetoric.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See Matthew 6:19.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Matthew 7:6 (“neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest perhaps they trample them under their feet”). Henryson quietly points out that the scriptures also use animals to teach by.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See Philippians 3:19 (“whose God is their belly”).[Return to reference 5](#)

Notes

- °: *cheerful*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flying dust*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sweeping*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *manipulate the broom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *moral*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *is disgusted by* [Return to reference](#) °